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Down the mountain, but not over the hill

Tiburon woman to run marathon on Mt. Everest

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If you've ever doubted that 60 is the new 40, meet the unconventional Brent Thomson, senior vice president of Pacific Union International, who is leaving for Nepal in November.

"When I told my board that I would be training to run the Mount Everest Marathon on Dec. 2, a few days before my 60th birthday, their jaws dropped," Thomson laughed.

Thomson will be one of 75 contestants in what is billed as the highest marathon in the world. Organized by Bufo Ventures Ltd., a nonprofit British company, the annual competition funds health and educational projects in rural Nepal. Pacific Union International is covering Thomson's expenses.

"Getting ready is like a third job," she says. "There's the marketing, because it's a fundraiser, and my work here with Pacific International, and the training."

The 26.2-mile race begins at 17,000 feet at Gorak Shep, close to Everest Base Camp in Nepal, and ends 6,000 feet below at Namche Bazaar. The race is downhill, but two steep uphill sections are considered particularly difficult. The course and altitude combine to demand rigorous training; after a helicopter ride from Kathmandu to Lukla, the trek to the base is all about adjusting to the altitude. Thomson heads out Nov. 14.

"It takes about nine days to get to the base station," Thomson says. "You hold over at different altitude gains to acclimatize before you move on, and there are tea houses along the way for sleep and shelter."

Qualifiers for the marathon must meet a short but daunting list of requirements, including three completed marathons in the past 12 months.

"And then you need a medical clearance, and you have to sign a waiver affirming that you accept the possibility of avalanches, landslides and other geological hazards — and then they have to have room for you," Thomson said.

Thomson cross-trains with a personal trainer once a week, but the rest of the time she runs on her own. Her idea of recreation is running on the Marin Headlands. Marathon or not, she begins portions of a 25-mile loop three times a week, runs the full 25 miles most Saturdays and, once a week, she grips two 12-pound weights while she runs 10 laps up and down the stairs on the Pagoda trail in Belvedere. The Pagoda workout — 185 stairs — is the equivalent of one lap up and down the Empire State building.

"I love to run," she says, "and I do a lot of distance running. I could run seven or eight hours and be happy as a clam."

Most contestants will finish the Everest Marathon in a little over eight hours. Sherpas — the Tibetan-Nepalese ethnic group that live high in the Himalayas — will run it in three, and Thomson says she just wants to have fun and finish, a formidable goal. The run will take her through beautiful landscapes, including a rhododendron forest, monuments, suspension bridges and frozen mountaintops; through it all she'll carry a backpack full of clothes, water, a whistle, and aspirin.



It may not be 17,000 feet, but at 8 a.m. Brent Thomson of Tiburon battles the morning mist at one of the highest elevations that the town offers. Photo: Elliot Karlan

"I'll take an aspirin every two hours and drink a ton of water," she explains, "and then you change throughout the day — from warm clothing in higher altitudes to running shorts and a T-shirt as you descend. It can go from sunny to freezing to gale force winds in a matter of half an hour, so it's a bad omen when you see clouds."

Thomson's trainer, Mary-Alice Cardinas, accredited with the American College of Sports Medicine, says her client's energy is exhilarating and there's no reason to think that she won't finish the marathon, but she adds that cross-training is a must.

"The thing about Brent is she has a great body for running, and she has the stamina," Cardinas said, "but anyone who wants to do this marathon, or just keep running into their 70s and 80s, has to have strength training. I've been working with Brent a lot with that — a lot of stair-climbing, weights, squats, push-ups — explosive stuff that she'll have to do in the race."

Diet is a part of Thomson's life, and vital to her training, but it doesn't rule the table. She eats fruits and vegetables and lean protein, and one day a week she indulges in carbs. "But I'm not on a regimen," she said. "My favorite treat is a beer and a hamburger. But then the runner's challenge is always to eat enough."

Thomson started running trails in the '80s, and shortly after a friend introduced her to the sport of Ride and Tie; a relay that involves a runner, a rider, and a horse.

"You ride in running shorts," she recalled. "The gun goes off, and one of you rides the horse as far as the other team member can walk or run — about 17 miles. Then you tie up the horse and run ahead on foot. Your teammate catches up, unties the horse

and rides another 17 miles and so on, for anywhere from 10 to 200 miles. They check the horse every 17 miles to make sure the horse hasn't been hurt," she laughed. "They don't care about you but they do care about the horse."

Trail-running is an exhilarating experience for Thomson. She says she loves the focus, the feel of placing each foot firmly on the ground, but she says it has a strong spiritual component as well.

"Running is spiritual. You're alone on the trails and in Nepal you go through fear, ecstasy, loneliness, reflection — it pulls you through everything in a way. You realize your insignificance," she continued. "You see the clear differentiation between the sky and the white mountains, and you realize your place. It's frightening."

This won't be Thomson's first trip to Nepal. She's been there four times since 1997. She says she loves the country and the people and, combined with her love of running, the fundraiser is a perfect way to contribute what she can in time, money and personal satisfaction.

"It's so humbling to be there, and with all the things that I have in my life, I have nothing to offer but my love, my energy. For myself, I do it because it's a challenge, and I can, and there will come a day when I can't. I don't want to have to look back and say, 'I wish.'"

Though the site's not live at press time, you'll be able to follow Thomson online at www.brentrunseverest.com.

Reporter Teri Roney covers the city of Belvedere and police and fire issues in Belvedere and Tiburon.