

Run the world



Cheryl Hile has completed marathons on every continent while raising money for MS.

by Shara Rutberg

In 2008, sitting on the exam table after a neurologist had tested her leg muscles, marathon runner Cheryl Hile lifted her chin and stared up at her doctor.

“You need to lower your expectations for running,” the neurologist told her. Hile’s jaw dropped open.

Then, she saw red.

“I was thinking all of these expletives,” she says today, recalling the experience from her home in Pacific Grove, California. “I could feel the back of my throat getting lumpy.”

But Hile, who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2006, didn’t want to cry in front of the neurologist. What she wanted to do was clear: She wanted to prove her wrong.

To say she did is an understatement.

Despite the doctor’s prediction that her MS-related foot drop would squash her running dreams, on June 4, 2017, Hile crossed the finish line of the Christchurch Marathon in New Zealand. She completed the Sydney Marathon in Australia three months later, becoming the first person with MS to run a marathon on all seven continents in one year.

“I’m thorough,” she says.

Getting back up

Hile is also incredibly determined. “‘I do what I can, and I never give up,’ is my mantra,” she says. It was born that day in the doctor’s office. The 44-year-old had used running to work through the depression she experienced after learning she had MS. She did not think the disease was interfering with her ability to run until she fell twice at the Carlsbad Half Marathon in California—causing her to cross the finish line with bloody knees—and tripped and almost fell 12 times at the New York City Marathon. That’s when she made the appointment with the neurologist and learned that the electrical impulses from her brain weren’t strong enough to reach her foot to tell it to lift.

8 marathons by the numbers

209.60 miles of running

2,240 calories of pre-race protein bars

44:10:49 amount of time spent running

67,181.13 miles of travel (airplane, train and car)

2,480 milligrams of caffeine pre-race and during run

254:32:00 amount of time spent traveling (not including layovers or waiting)

Hile started running in 2000, fascinated by the rollercoaster of emotions the races brought out in her veteran marathoner husband, Brian Hile. Though she’d never run before, Cheryl decided to do a marathon, too. Her first training run around the block left her in tears.

“I cried because it was too hard,” she says. “But I knew if I kept trying, if I created goals, I’d improve. And I did.” Midway into her first marathon, she knew she was hooked.

She started thinking about which one to do next. By the time she was diagnosed with MS, she had completed more than a dozen.

“I’ve gotten a lot more stubborn since my diagnosis,” Hile says. “You have to be a tough customer to fight this disease. I don’t want to give up.” So she found ways to keep going, such as visiting a podiatrist who connected her with orthotist Ara Mirzaian, at the Hanger Clinic in California, near where she had been living.

The right fit

Orthotics existed to help people walk with foot drop, but the devices would break during the prolonged pounding of 26.2 miles. Mirzaian worked with Hile to create a custom carbon-fiber ankle-foot orthotic. The device reaches from a footbed beneath her foot, up the back of her

leg to a brace that cups the back of her calf, and closes with a strap around the front. It keeps her right foot at enough of an angle to not drop and trip her as she runs. It took a lot of creative adjustments from Mirzaian and trials for Hile, including one phase when the device's angle would not allow her to turn right. Finally, Mirzaian tuned the device to correctly support Hile's foot without rubbing. Hile had to drastically change her gait to run with a right leg that does not fully function. "I push off with the left side of my body, and my right side follows along," she says.

Once she was back in her distance-running groove, Hile decided she wanted to do something big to give back to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. "They were instrumental in educating me about the disease when I was first diagnosed, and they encouraged me to keep on moving," she says. She participated in and raised money for MS research through MS Rockstars. She also participates in Finish MS.

"Not only did my family and sponsors help me," Hile says, "but it was also the support of the MS community across the world. MS organizations helped me register for marathons in their countries, connected me to others living with MS and provided assistance with local travel logistics. The Secretary General of the Japan MS Society even picked us up at the airport and cheered us on at several places along the marathon route with homemade signs!"

Going the distance

With her husband at her side, Hile completed races in Cape Town, South Africa; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Honolulu, Hawaii; King George Island, Antarctica; Tokyo, Japan; Vienna, Austria; Christchurch, New Zealand; and Sydney, Australia. Antarctica's White Continent Marathon was a high point, she says, despite the watermelon-sized boulders on the rocky course, which left her with "blisters in places I didn't know I could get blisters." The terrain ripped the sole off one of her husband's running shoes. But they ran past Emperor Penguins, across black terrain framed by distant snow-capped peaks. "It was so surreal," she says. "I wouldn't believe I was there if I didn't have pictures." The night after the marathon, Hile accomplished another "first" out on Antarctic tundra: her first time camping out. "I had to pee in a bucket!" she says, laughing.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder

The Buenos Aires race was one of her toughest days. Recovering from a cold and clobbered by heat-related MS symptoms, she struggled. "It was a really hot day. I had a hard time breathing. I was stressed out," she says. "The heat was giving me a lot of electric shocks on the right side of my body. I was in a lot of pain, feeling very off, not sure if I could finish. I was miserable. But I knew giving up was not a choice." She kept her mantra, "I do what I can, and I never give up," in her mind. And, "I thought about all my friends back home rooting for me, about all the fantastic MS friends I had made along the way and about my husband running by my side." She turned her mind around, started to actually enjoy the race and crossed the finish line.

A meaningful journey

Hile's around-the-world journey was "life changing," she says, and not only because she accomplished her goal of seven (plus one) races on seven continents. She hadn't anticipated how much sharing her experience would mean to others. "Before, I didn't really talk about my running to people with MS—I know I'm luckier than a lot of people with MS. I can still follow my passion and continue to run," she says. "Coming out with my story and having others say I inspired them to start an exercise program or break barriers talking to their doctors has been inspiring."

Run with Cheryl Hile

Inspired by the MS community she connected with over the past few years, Cheryl Hile plans to gather people with MS and their supporters to run an event together in November 2019 at the [VCU Health Richmond Marathon](#) in Virginia.

Send her a message at [cherylhile7on7 on Facebook](#) to learn more and sign up. People will be running all distances: 8K, half marathon and full marathon.

"People we see at doctors' offices, when they see what Cheryl can do (more than 40 marathons after diagnosis), they tell us later that they've started a walking program ... and they want to start running," Brian Hile says. "I always tell her she's having a bigger influence on people than she thinks."

"Cheryl embarked on a global effort to make a global impact," says Rachael Nuwash, associate vice president, events, with the Society. "Cheryl's commitment to running eight marathons in 12 months was an inspiration to so many affected by MS around the world. The Society is grateful for Cheryl and the awareness and fundraising she brings."

"I don't expect people to run marathons," Hile says. "My whole thing is to encourage people to move. MS is a disease that stops you from moving. You do what you can—yoga, walk to your mailbox, walk seven minutes a day. Keep firing those neurons. Fight the disease. Create goals and be positive. You can have a great life despite MS as long as you work hard."

In September 2017, moments after crossing the Sydney Marathon finish line, after hugging her husband and her friends, Hile lifted her chin up, and once again, her jaw dropped open—into an enormous smile.

Shara Rutberg is a freelance writer in Evergreen, Colorado.

Learn how to participate in [Finish MS](#).