

'I had to prove to my sons that Dad doesn't give up'

Alex Flynn's world was rocked when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, but endurance challenges help him to cope.

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This year Alex Flynn, 48, will attempt something no Briton has ever done, and only eight have achieved overall. Over eight months, Flynn will try to complete RacingThePlanet's 4 Deserts Grand Slam Plus. After Namibia in April there are three more desert races: the Gobi in Mongolia, the Atacama in Chile, and a final leg in Antarctica in November. Sandwiched in between is a mountain run in Georgia. Each leg is 155 miles.



As if that weren't enough, Flynn will combine these with additional challenges: a Mont Blanc hike and a 23,300ft Himalayan peak. There will be preparatory ultra-marathons, such as a 33-mile jaunt around Loch Ness. Flynn, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2008, is in for a busy time.

Flynn was always sporty. As a child it was rugby, football and judo. In his 20s he boxed for Surrey County. Then, in his 30s, he picked up the ultra-distance running bug. Bored one night, he phoned a friend and suggested doing the Marathon des Sables. The response was: "You're mad."

The six-day, 155-mile ultra-marathon across the Sahara regularly sees temperatures of 50C (122F), and has been described as the toughest race in the world. Punishing at the best of times, but in between signing up and the event, Flynn's world was rocked.

"I was stupidly fit. I was riding 50 miles a day on my bike. I was running three half-marathons a week, the odd marathon, and gym work as well," Flynn explains.

But one day he was eating a bowl of breakfast porridge at work in Cambridge, where he was a lawyer, when he noticed his little finger moving. "I tried to stop it moving, and it didn't. I thought, 'that's not good'." His wife at the time said he was over-exercising.

Did he cut back? "Not a lot. Maybe one less half-marathon a week." Flynn eventually saw a specialist who said it was either Wilson's disease, which is treatable when diagnosed early,

and appears in the retina. Or Parkinson's. "I went to an optometrist and he told me I had beautiful eyes. That's when I knew.

"I went into a dark place. I contemplated checking out. I thought that was a reasonable thing to do. My mental health was at an all-time low." Flynn says the support he received from doctors was fairly inadequate: "you need to be proactive". But he realised his family needed him. "I wanted to prove to my sons that Dad doesn't give up."

According to Parkinson's UK, two people in this country are diagnosed with the disease each hour. While most are over 50, it is by no means exclusive. Singer Ozzy Osbourne this week revealed he was diagnosed a year ago at the age of 70, while the acclaimed chef Fergus Henderson was told he had the disease in his mid-30s. Parkinson's Life says a two-year-old from Canada could be the youngest. "It doesn't discriminate, it's all-encompassing, and welcomes everybody," says Flynn.

One of the primary symptoms of Parkinson's, a neurodegenerative disorder that affects 145,000 people in the UK, is rigidity, reducing the sufferer's range of motion. "It's about stopping me moving, stopping me speaking, walking, writing, swallowing, having sex – haven't got to that point yet. The medicine just hides the symptoms." Dyskinesia (involuntary movements) is common.

There is one medicine Flynn describes as better than the rest: running. "If you're in a dark place and you can't do anything about it, get moving. It'll increase endorphins and serotonin."

Is it a distraction? "Running allows me to organise my life. I'll disappear off and do an ultra-marathon, and people ask what I think about. I say my life, what I'm doing, I plan strategies, so that by the end of it I'm zen." During one race, Flynn describes switching off to the point where he had no knowledge of where he'd been.

That 2009 Marathon de Sable could reasonably have been written off. But not for someone with Flynn's grit – though it didn't go swimmingly. In his first multi-day event, he had to be pumped with glucose, was sent a medic car that "disappeared off into the distance", and got lost. A Berber on a "crappy step-through scooter" saved him, before he withdrew due to viral pericarditis, a potentially fatal inflammation of the heart lining. A year later, he finished the race, placing 528th out of more than 1,100 competitors.

Between then and 2014, Flynn completed a 10 million-metre challenge, with some impressive feats: 160 miles across the Bavarian Alps in 52 hours; London to Rome, 1,457 miles; over 124 miles in the Amazon; and a 3,256 miles, 25-day crossing of the United States using four disciplines (running, cycling, kayaking, swimming).

He's suffered a fractured right tibia; ruined tendons; nine bike falls on the same event, resulting in a disc bulging into his spine. An Ironman back home in England proved troublesome. "It was the end of September and cold. I did the swim, and got hypothermia. I did the cycle but couldn't run the marathon bit, so I was walking it. We got a northerly wind with rain, and I got exposure – in Henley-on-Thames!"

Flynn, who gives regular speeches on his experiences, is clear Parkinson's is not just a physical hindrance. It can end careers, too. Flynn was eventually made redundant; his main source of income now is sponsorship ("I became a professional athlete, which was bizarre" he says), and public speaking.

The abilities of millions, Flynn insists, are wasted, leading to “a lack of self-confidence, a lack of self-esteem, a lack of self-worth. I love every day doing what I do now, but I am trained as a lawyer, I enjoyed it, it was something I was good at. I think I was prematurely taken out of my career.”

Flynn is adamant those with Parkinson's should focus on movement. (Exercise is “especially good for you if you have Parkinson's,” says Parkinson's UK.) A spin bike is handy if you can't walk far, and he recommends 30 minutes, with high-intensity 30-second bursts for the final five minutes. “You will see the impact of that high-intensity training. As long as I'm moving, exercising, it ameliorates my symptoms quite considerably.”

At one point, running in Death Valley, it was like his Parkinson's had gone. “I felt so much power. That feeling of positivity, because of my exercise, was and is one of the best moments in my life.” Flynn often feels significantly better in the days following a run.

He is nervous ahead of the 4 Deserts Grand Slam Plus. Being the first British finisher, to his knowledge, would be “brilliant, an absolute honour.” But being the first with Parkinson's, or any “disability”, would be even better.

Is he still motivated by proving to his children that giving up is never an option? “I'm still doing that, it gives me my goal. Everybody needs a goal. If you have Parkinson's, and can't get across the lounge, that's your Everest. That's what you're aiming for, however you do it. Be it on all fours, or dragging yourself across the floor.”

Flynn will always have a goal. “There will come a point when I won't be able to run those big distances. I'll ride bikes. And when I can't ride a bike or walk, I'll do stuff in wheel-chairs.”

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