

# Rehab Recycle's Marathon Man

Rehab Recycle employee, Rob O'Brien, takes on one of the toughest endurance tests on the face of the planet – 'The Atacama Crossing'.

**IMAGINE RUNNING 160 MILES - THE EQUIVALENT OF SIX** marathons - in just six days across some of the harshest terrain in the world. It sounds tough. Now imagine doing all of this just a few years after a brain tumour resulted in you having to learn how to walk again. But that's exactly what Rehab Recycle employee, Rob O'Brien from Cobh, Co. Cork, has done.

In March this year, the father of two was the sole Irish competitor in the 'Atacama Crossing' in Chile. An extreme ultra-marathon event, the crossing is regarded as one of the toughest foot races on the planet. The 94 competitors start the race at 11,000 feet and follow a course that runs downhill through the driest desert in the world, carrying all their own food, clothing and survival gear with them on their backs.

*Picture courtesy of Miki Barlok.*

Rob spoke to *Rehab News* on his return to Ireland having successfully completed the strenuous challenge. "I'm delighted to be home and to have finished the race. It was, without doubt, a fantastic experience, but the toughest test I've ever faced. For those six days, it was a question of survival. Each day you were confronted with soaring temperatures and tough terrain. What's more, it got extremely cold at night. It's no wonder that close to twenty competitors dropped out of the race, among them many of the world's top ultra-marathon runners. For nearly a year in advance of the race, I ran up to 70km a week and practically lived in the gym. I really needed the stamina that I'd built up over months of rigorous training."

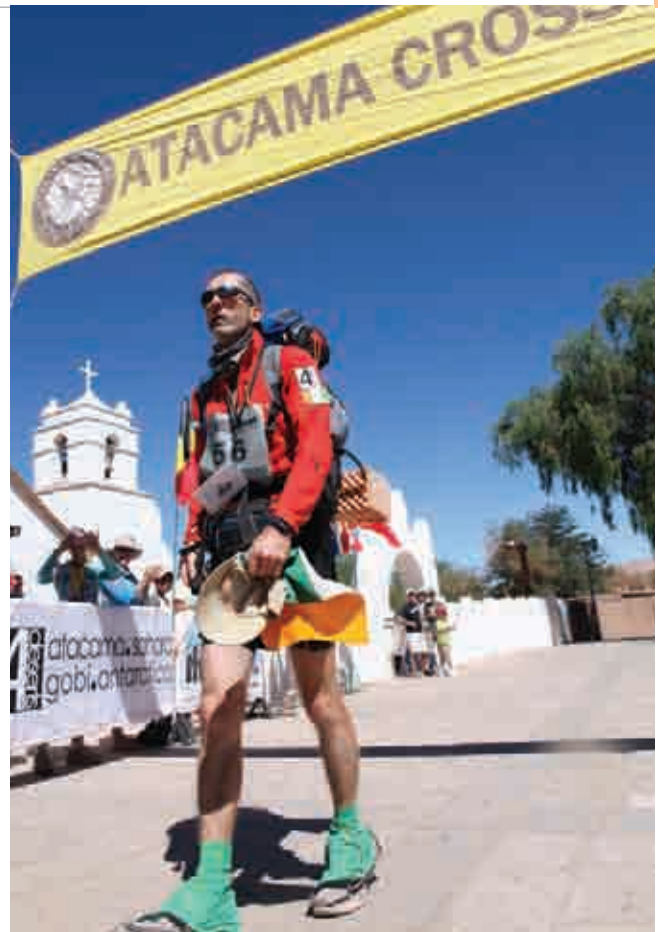
It's all a far cry from 2001, when Rob had a large and advanced tumour removed from the left side of his brain. Although he had noticed some loss of hearing and dizzy spells in the weeks before, the diagnosis of a tumour had come as a shock to Rob, a busy conference and banqueting manager. As a result of the operation, Rob lost the hearing in his left ear. The sight in his left eye was also impaired and there is some paralysis in the left side of his face. Displaying characteristic determination, Rob remained optimistic and motivated throughout his recuperation. "My life was saved. That was the main thing."

It was during this period that Rob saw a television documentary on the Marathon de Sables, a 151-mile endurance race across the Sahara Desert. "It was the maddest thing I'd ever seen. I thought, I'll try to get there." It was an ambitious plan for someone who'd just had to re-learn how to walk.

Rob returned to work five months after his operation but realised that such a busy hands-on environment was no longer for him. He decided to move back to Cork to think about his future. It was there that he saw an advertisement for National Learning Network's 'IT and Business Studies' course at the centre on the Model Farm Road.

"I jumped at the course and it was a huge help to me. Everybody was encouraged to give their best and it was an easygoing learning environment. The course gave me confidence to send out my CV. I wanted to dive into the workforce and see what happened."

He applied for a lot of jobs and was thrilled when he landed the role of receptionist/administrator at Rehab Recycle on the Monahan Road in Cork, where he's able to put into practice the skills he had learned at National Learning Network. "I'm more confident in an office than I ever thought possible because of my course."



*Pictured above:* Rehab Recycle's Rob O'Brien crosses the finish line having successfully completed the 160-mile 'Atacama Crossing' ultra-marathon.

Rob is now a veteran of many marathons, raising thousands of euros for different charities along the way. The Dublin City Marathon in 2002 was Rob's first marathon and he ran it in memory of his young cousin, Warren. An avid runner, Warren had visited Rob in hospital on many occasions and was preparing for the marathon when he was tragically killed in a mountaineering accident before he could run it. Ironically, it turned out that Rob was the lucky one.

Rob went on to compete in two more Dublin City Marathons, as well as the Cork City Marathon, and the New York City Marathon. In 2005, Rob crossed the finish line in the Marathon de Sables, the Saharan endurance race which had so captivated his imagination years earlier.

So, what's next for Rehab Recycle's very own marathon man? "I'm very proud of all that I've achieved and, to be honest, I've done everything that I set out to do. I've got some great memories and made good friends. So, I think I'm going to enjoy my health and take things easy for a little while. Running is in my blood, though, so I don't think that I'll be putting away my runners just yet!" ■