

# HEALTH+*Wellness*

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## Profile

### GLOBE TROTTER

*Meet Michael Wardian,  
a top competitor in the world's  
longest and most grueling races.*

By Sandra Shelley |

Photography by Kyle LaFerriere

Mike Wardian on the  
Lubber Run Park trail near  
his home in Arlington.

**Michael Wardian**, 46, has competed in three Olympic trials, medaled at World Championships, and has run more than 250 marathons and 100 ultramarathons. Known for his speed and incredible endurance, he's set a world record for the fastest time completing seven marathons on seven continents in seven days and pounded through Death Valley for 135 miles—in July. His personal best marathon time is 2:17:49. When he's not running, Wardian is one of the owners of Potomac Maritime, LLC, an international shipbroker. He and his wife, Jennifer, live in Arlington with their children and two vizslas, including Rosie, his running buddy. *Virginia Living* recently caught up with Wardian to find out how he got started, what keeps him going, and what his next big race will be.



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Wardian running over the Rio Miel river near Baracoa in Cuba in 2016.

**Virginia Living:** When did you get serious about running?

**Mike Wardian:** I picked up running just to stay fit when I stopped playing [Division I] lacrosse my junior year in college [in 1994]. I would go a little bit farther each day. All of a sudden I was running across the whole campus—I went to Michigan State, so it's a big campus—going out to where the farm animals are [he laughs].

**VL:** How did you get interested in running marathons?

**MW:** I went to my friend Vince Voison's house for Easter one year, and his mom, Vicki, had just gotten back from the Boston Marathon. She had her little space blanket and her medal. And I thought, wow, if Vincent's mom who, she just looked like a regular person, could do a marathon, then I should be able to run a marathon. ... She was generous enough to give me a training plan.

My goal was to run the Boston Marathon. I ran the Marine Corps marathon in 1996 and qualified for Boston. I went to the Boston Marathon in 1997 and ran a 2:54. I was completely hooked.

**VL:** What was your first ultramarathon? (Note: An ultramarathon is any distance over a standard 26.2-mile marathon.)

**MW:** I found out about this race called the JFK 50 Mile. I thought that if you just take my marathon time—I had gotten it down to about 2:40 by then—and double that, I should be able to win. [He laughs.] Of course, uh, it doesn't really work like that. So, I got smoked, but I did finish it.

**VL:** How much do you run a day?

**MW:** Typically, I'm running between 70 and 100 miles a week. So today, I ran 10 miles this morning after an hour-long CrossFit-type workout, and I'm about to go for a three- or four-mile walk, so I'll probably get 14 or 15 miles in today.

**VL:** How many sneakers do you go through in a year?

**MW:** I get that question a lot ... probably 20 pairs of shoes a year.

**VL:** What has been your most challenging race?

**MW:** There's a race in Death Valley called Badwater Ultra where you run across the desert in the heat of the summer. ... I've done a race called the Marathon des Sables where you run across the Sahara Desert carrying all your food and gear for a week.

**VL:** What are the logistics of the 7/7/7 race, which you ran in 2017 and 2019?

**MW:** You basically run fly, run fly, run fly. ... In 2019, we mustered in Cape Town, flew to Antarctica, ran the race in Antarctica, flew back to Cape Town, ran the race there, flew to Perth, Australia, ran the race there, flew to Dubai, ran the race there, flew to Madrid, ran the race there, then we flew from there to Santiago, Chile, and then from there, we finished in Miami. It was pretty crazy.

**VL:** What do you consider your biggest achievement?

**MW:** I won a silver medal at the 100K World Championships and a gold medal as part of the 100K team, and two bronze medals at the 50K World Championships. That was such an honor,

*“Establish a good base and get your legs under you, and you can fine-tune the rest.”*

—Mike Wardian

the chance to represent your country. Probably one of my favorite moments was standing on the podium hearing the national anthem because of something I was a part of.

**VL:** What is your next big race?

**MW:** One of my goals is, I want to run across the United States. I'm trying to figure out how to make that happen and hopefully be able to do that in the next year or so.

**VL:** What advice do you give to people who are interested in ultrarunning?

**MW:** First, find something that excites you and motivates you. ... Make it something that's just attainable, but it's going to be difficult to get to. For some people, that might be a 50K or a 100K, or a lot of people want to see if they can run triple digits and do a 100-miler. But make it something that gets you fired up and excited.

And then, the best thing that I've ever been told and that I try to practice, is just be consistent. Like it's much better to run three to five miles every day than to do one 15-mile run and take six days off. Get in a routine, get in a habit of doing something every day. The rest of the stuff—like the tempo, the track workouts, the hills—doesn't really help if you're not doing the work to build up the base. So establish a good base and get your legs under you, and you can fine-tune the rest.

**VL:** Can you tell me a crazy story of something that happened to you during a race?

**MW:** I've been chased by dogs on all seven continents, including Antarctica. I've had guns pulled on me. ... I've been hypothermic in a cave. I've also had the opportunity to see many sunrises in places that few people have ever been to. I've been to the White House. I've gotten to do trips for the State Department as a Goodwill Ambassador to places around the world. It's been incredible. I feel super lucky to have been able to find something that I love this much and find a way to share it with people.

Sandra Shelley is a freelance magazine and advertising writer in Richmond. SandraShelley.com

ABOVE PHOTO BY STEVE GODWIN



Belt buckles from Wardian's Hardrock and Western States Endurance runs, each 100 miles long through mountainous terrain.



Wardian stocks boxes of running shoes in his basement; he goes through about 20 pairs each year.