

# IN *Heins* SIGHT

JO KROMBERG MARVELS AT HOW A VISUALLY  
IMPAIRED ADVENTURER TACKLED THE HARSH  
MARATHON IN THE WORLD – IN ANTARCTICA

Hein Wagner's favourite colour is black (he thinks). He was born blind and, dear reader, before you think me gormless enough to pose such a question to a blind person, he says so himself on his website.





**A**part from being blind (and evidently having a slightly dark sense of humour about it all), Wagner is no ordinary person. He was born on 24 May 1972 with a condition known as Leber's congenital amaurosis, or LCA – an inherited retinal degenerative disease characterised by severe loss of vision at birth. There is no known cure at present.

Wagner had to learn to be resilient and tenacious from a very young age. "At the age of five, my parents sent me off to the Worcester School (now Institute) for the Blind. At the time, I could not believe they dropped me off at the school at such a young age, and for days I got totally lost on the school grounds and in the boarding house," he recalls. "But, in retrospect, that is the best thing they could ever have done for me. Struggling to find my way at such a young age taught me such valuable lessons.

"I'm inspired by people who find their passion and live fulfilling lives and at the same time making a contribution to society. My parents, both mom and dad, played a huge role in helping me believe in myself and being kind and generous to others."

He started his career as a switchboard operator, but the development of technology inspired him to enter the information technology industry, which saw him working for companies such as MWEB and Thawte Consulting. Here he quickly worked his way up to international sales manager, managing a team of 15 sighted individuals.

Yet, Wagner still struggled with his disability psychologically, and decided to take up extreme sports events. Some of his adventures include sailing from



Cape Town to Rio de Janeiro in the Cape to Rio Yacht Race, skydiving, participating in IRONMAN events and completing the Absa Cape Epic. In 2009 he set the World Blind Land Speed Record at 322.52 km/h.

He also completed the 15th Antarctica Marathon in March this year (colloquially described as the harshest marathon on the planet), the first time ever that a blind person participated. Nick Kruiskamp, well-respected athlete and race champion, was Wagner's guide.

"I always knew the Antarctica Marathon would be a test of endurance, mental strength and perseverance. However, I never thought that being on the seventh continent – surrounded by ice-capped mountains, glaciers, icebergs, snow, penguins, whales and other wildlife – would be so emotionally overwhelming," says Wagner.

The treacherous race covered the most rugged terrain comprising mud, ice and sludge. He describes his perilous start of the race: "Within a few minutes, we tracked through the first bit of snow, followed by loads of mud. This quickly turned into a series of small water streams and, although we tried to jump over

them, they pulled me in to the very centre of their icy cold. My mind was racing ahead to frostbite and amputations, when I told myself to snap out of it – motivating myself by realising it was just the beginning, so I forced myself to focus."

Wagner continues: "In a brutally honest way, Antarctica reflects the ever dramatically changing world we live in, as no five minutes down there are the same. A beautiful, sunny morning at zero degrees Celsius can very quickly change into a snowy ice wind and rain, with a chill factor of minus 15 to minus 25 degrees. I've never experienced anything colder than Antarctica. It had me shaking to my very core!"

He participated to promote the abilities of those living with disabilities, and to raise funds and create awareness of the Vision Trust – a non-profit organisation he founded in mid-2008, which strives to make the world as we know it a more accessible place for persons living with disabilities.

"Since I can remember, I've had a fascination with the North and South Poles, and when Mike Bailey (his running partner) came up with the idea to try

and get an entry for the Antarctica Marathon, I jumped at the chance!"

So how does Wagner prepare for events such as the Antarctica Marathon? "It is tricky to simulate the conditions in sunny Cape Town. We spent some time in a cold room at minus 18 degrees to acclimatise. I decided not to do many off-road miles or trail runs, as being blind leaves me a lot more exposed to ankle injuries than the sighted.

"Nothing I did back home could ever prepare me for what we went through in Antarctica. My approach on the day was one step at a time."

He does not consider himself an

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adrenalin junkie, however. "I guess I'm just hooked on great experiences and life has so many to offer."

Wagner says that accepting his blindness unconditionally has certainly been his most challenging expedition and achievement to date. "Just when you think you get it, you've got it, you have it – the mountain is just a little higher. Accepting the one thing I cannot do –

known as Dinner in the Dark, and his website describes it thus: "Dinner in the Dark is the perfect dinner event to open the eyes of those who are simply too lazy to see."

"I've been working in the corporate entertainment industry for many years, but this event really moves people deeply. Many funny things happen in the dark, like highly educated guests arguing with

that stands between disaster and us. Make fear your friend, acknowledge it for what it is, take from it what it is trying to point out to you, and get on with it."

He says his team is the most important part of all his adventures. "Without my team's backup and support, I cannot do what I do. Somehow I manage to find amazing people on my journey who are willing to help, support and get involved, and I'm most grateful to all of them."

So what are Wagner's plans for the next couple of years? Any exciting quests?

"At this time, I'm training very, very hard to try and qualify for the South African para-cycling team to represent South Africa in the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio. A long, hard road ahead – however, I'm willing to give it all I have."

When I ask him what message he most wants to impart to people through his life's quests, this remarkable man says the following: "Anything you believe is not possible is actually possible; you just have to change the way you look at things. If you do that, the things you look at will change." ☺

Visit [www.heinwagner.co.za](http://www.heinwagner.co.za) for more information.

*"I believe fear is the one thing that stands between disaster and us."*

see – allowed me to open my mind to so many other opportunities. The Absa Cape Epic also came close as my second biggest challenge, though."

His unique experiences and outlook on life have afforded him numerous invitations to share his story and, in 2004, he decided to take up motivational speaking as a full-time career. Another of his initiatives is a concept

me over the fact that I gave them white wine and they asked for red wine. When the lights come on, they avoid me like the plague!" Wagner says with a laugh.

It is not all fun and games, though, and he has been faced with a few life-threatening situations in the course of his adventures. So how does he cope with fear? "I made fear my friend a long time ago. I believe fear is the one thing