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One tough mudder

Local graduate student is competing in what is 'probably the toughest event on the planet'

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*Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press
Caelin White trains for the World's
Toughest Mudder competition.*

By the end of next year, Caelin White hopes to have added the letters PhD after his name.

This November, the University of Manitoba psychology student hopes to add another title -- one that requires a different kind of stamina and mental grit.

White, 33, will travel to Englishtown, N.J., on Nov. 17-18 to compete in a 24-hour endurance race in a bid to become World's Toughest Mudder.

Organizers say it's "probably the toughest event on the planet." And judging by the 10-mile-or-so obstacle course, which was designed by British Special Forces and features obstacles with names like Arctic Enema, Ball Shrinker and Electric Eel, that might be hard to dispute.

"A good chunk of it is running through mud," says White between workouts at Sport Manitoba, where he's been training since May.

"There's 10,000-volt shocks. There's running through fires and there's an ice-water dunk. They immerse you in cold water again and again."

The Vancouver native knows all this because last May he travelled to the Minneapolis, Minn., area to take part in one of the regular endurance challenges in the Tough Mudder series. That's a 10-12-mile course with 25 obstacles -- gruelling, but you only have to complete it once. White was among an estimated 500,000 people in North America, the U.K. and Australia who completed a Tough Mudder course in 2012. The top 800 of those finishers qualify for the World's Toughest Mudder challenge, which is designed to find the toughest man, woman, and four-person team on the planet.



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Qualifiers will have 24 hours to complete as many laps as possible of the obstacle course. It will contain around 40 obstacles, including the toughest ones from all the qualifying events.

"The idea is to be ready for pretty much anything because they don't tell you the obstacles until the day before and a good dozen of them you've have never seen before," says White, whose training team includes performance and conditioning coaches as well as a sports nutritionist, physiotherapist and sports psychologist.

Some of those obstacles will be acutely familiar -- e.g. the Mud Mile, with its waist-deep sludge.

"It's essentially just repeated mounds of very slippery mud, and there's rocks in the mud and you have to crawl over one after another for a mile," says the uber-fit, clean-cut White, who stands six feet, 195 pounds. "It's extremely taxing."

The doctoral candidate may also have to once again tangle with an Electric Eel: Participants slide on their belly through frigid water or a layer of ice while trying to avoid being shocked by the live wires dangling overhead. Or take a little Log Bog Jog, jumping over and crawling under fallen trees strewn across the course. Or maybe he'll have to lug a heavy log for half a mile, hauling it up a hill or two along the way.

"Last year they had to swim across a lake with a log," says White, who has a 30-pound chunk of tree trunk stashed at his training site at West Hawk Lake, where he does his trail runs and cold-water swims.

In 2012, the World's Toughest Mudder completed seven laps of the 11-mile course -- around 130 kilometres -- in the allotted 24 hours. He slept for three of those hours.

Unlike a regular Tough Mudder event, which organizers insist not be viewed as a race but a personal challenge where the goal is simply to complete the course, this one is indeed a competition, with a cash prize of \$15,000 for the individual (male and female) and \$20,000 for the winning team.

Being a Mudder, according to the website (www.toughmudder.com), "is all about taking on the obstacles in your life and the enormous sense of accomplishment that you feel when you overcome them."

White says that while the race will obviously be largely his own personal challenge, part of his motivation for entering was to combine the event with his role as a mental health advocate.

Viewed through his therapeutic eyes, he says, the Toughest Mudder is a fitting metaphor for what many of his clients face every day.



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"Getting help for mental health issues in Canada is like running an obstacle course. It's hurdle after hurdle, obstacle after obstacle," says White, who moved to Winnipeg in 2007 to complete his doctorate in clinical psychology.

There's a 14-16-month waiting list at the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at St. Boniface General Hospital where he currently works. And White says he's very aware that not everyone who would benefit from the services of a licenced psychologist can afford the \$155 an hour standard rate. Never mind the stigma associated with mental illness, he says, which affects 20 per cent of the population at any given time. And yet two out of three sufferers do not seek help.

That's why White, who serves on the board of the Manitoba Psychological Society, started the Mind Your Mental Health public awareness campaign. The [website](#) includes educational resources and links for visitors to lobby politicians to make psychological health care more accessible. There's also a link to his WTM training blog.

People tend to separate physical and mental health, he says, but they're really just two sides of the same coin.

"If you break a leg or twist an ankle, you can get treatment and there's no stigma associated with it," White says. "But in our day-to-day lives, we incur psychological injuries, too.

"We know that effective, evidence-based psychological treatments are available, and we know that people want them, but they're not readily available in the public system."

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