

Ger Copeland: 'I'm the luckiest f***ker in the world.'
Photo: Gerry Mooney



Miracle man

Ger Copeland suffered brain injury in a freak skiing accident but his unbreakable spirit has seen him travel on an inspirational journey

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There are two ways of looking at this. Either you could say Ger Copeland is lucky, that he has no divine right to be alive, and focus on how he's defied outrageous odds not just to live, but to live the way he does — winning marathons and scaling unfathomable heights for a man in his condition.

You could look at the 10 per cent chance of survival he once had and think how fortunate he is to still be around.

Or you could say that he's unlucky. That he had the rotten, ridiculous misfortune to be standing in a particular place at a particular moment on a particular ski slope in the French Alps, right as an out-of-control young man — a 20-stone human missile — came hurtling in his direction.

You could focus on all that's been stolen from him by the resulting collision and what he has been left with — chronic pain, a permanent brain injury, uncontrollable vomiting after every meal — and think of how desperately sad it is, how utterly cruel his misfortune.

So, really, this comes down to perspective.

Just as two people can look at an optical illusion and see two very different things, his story gives you, and him, a choice.

But in a life that's been fleeced of so much, the one thing his accident couldn't make off with is the control of his own thoughts, choices and actions. The clock is ticking now. It has been since March 2024. But, then again, it's ticking for all of us. Copeland just hears its rhythmic drumbeat a little louder than most. And that pushes him to a decision: to get busy living or get busy dying. He knows which one he's chosen.

As for whether he's lucky or unlucky? Give him some time. We'll come back to that.

Let's start at the airport. It's a Saturday afternoon in Cape Town, mid-November, and I'm introduced to Copeland as we shuffle towards a security checkpoint.

A few hours earlier, the 47-year-old Dubliner had claimed victory at the Lion's Head Marathon, and by the time we board the same flight to Antarctica, where Copeland will race another 26.2 miles, we have traded phone numbers and a plan to sit down for a proper chat once his latest adventure is behind him.

We meet a few weeks later on a damp, cold afternoon by the Spire in Dublin, where Copeland is flanked by his wife, Jenny, and his son, Pierce. "Look after him in those crowds," says Jenny as she departs.

He carefully plants his walking poles in front of him on each step, moving slowly, gingerly,

telling me there's often some wag, unaware of his condition, who'll laugh and ask, 'You off hiking, buddy?' "I've a brain injury," he'll reply. "I need these for balance."

Copeland grew up in Santry and had a "crazy childhood", moving between the homes of his separated parents. "Running for me was always therapy," he says. "It always gave me focus."

Cycling, triathlon and Gaelic football vied for his attention in his youth. He played alongside Jason Sherlock for the Dublin minors in 1994. But after maxing out at five-foot-six, his senior career hit a natural ceiling. He had also cycled for Ireland at junior level, but in his early 20s he drifted away from sport, focusing on his career.

He soon ballooned to 16 stone. But after a friend of his called him a "big, fat bastard", he pledged to run the Dublin Marathon six months later and to break 3 hours 30 minutes. He lost six stone before the race and clocked 3:28. That was in 2001, and in the quarter-century since, Copeland has run over 300 marathons, winning around 70 of them — mostly small ones in the likes of Dingle or Longford. His PB is 2:36.

At the height of the Celtic Tiger, he started a construction company that proved hugely successful. He married, had three sons — Fionn (18), Oisín (15) and Pierce (13) — and later got divorced. Six years ago, he met Jenny, a Florida native who he married in June

2024, three months after his accident. Jenny and Fionn were with him in Morzine when the accident happened.

The collision at first seemed innocuous, but it would irrevocably alter his life. It was 8am on a crisp Thursday morning and they were just getting started on the slopes when Copeland spotted a young, heavy skier barreling down the mountain, colliding into his friends at the bottom. Copeland turned to Jenny and Fionn: "He's going to kill someone today, if not himself."

A while later, Copeland was standing halfway down the slope, awaiting Jenny, when the same guy came speeding around a corner with "no balance, no control" and crashed into him, clattering his neck with an accidental elbow. Copeland was knocked over and the youngster cartwheeled several times before reaching a stop. Copeland picked up the young man's skis and approached him, irate. The youngster apologised, and Copeland helped him put his skis back on, telling him he needed to learn how to brake, that he was a danger to everyone.

That evening, Copeland had a pain in his neck and a headache, but it didn't feel major. He returned home two days later, and the day after that, lined up at a four-mile road race in Lusk. Copeland hoped to run under 20 minutes but was way off that, unable to break 22

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and, as he says, feeling sickly. The following evening, he was in a car with his friend Dee when he felt dizzy after turning his head to look out the window. He told Dee he needed a Coke or some chocolate as he was “out of it”, with a crunching pain behind his eyes. “I’m having a stroke or a brain haemorrhage,” he told her. “Get me to Beaumont.”

On the way to hospital, he struggled to breathe and was unable to swallow. He underwent a CT scan and medics identified a brain bleed from the accident a few days prior, but noted fresh blood was also flowing from elsewhere. Subsequent CT scans and an MRI showed a dissection in the artery feeding the cerebellum in his brain.

Jenny had been on the way home from work, walking to the Tara Street DART station, when Copeland called her. She rushed to Beaumont, arriving around the same time as Copeland, seeing her then-fiancé stumble into A&E. “He was vomiting blood, he couldn’t swallow, he felt like he was choking,” she recalls. “He said, ‘I think I’m dying, I think I’m dying.’”

“At least I’m here with you,” she said.

He was moved into intensive care, put on blood thinners, but had to wait until the next morning to see a consultant. By then, he had deteriorated. His vision was upside down, and everything was seen through a Vaseline-like haze. He could barely hear or speak. The consultant asked him to touch his nose and he got nowhere close.

“I’m dying,” he told Jenny. “This is over. I’m an athlete: I know my body. Look after my kids. Look after you.”

A priest was called, and Copeland was given the last rites. Was he scared of dying in that moment?

“No,” he says. “I’ve a really strong faith system. I don’t preach it, but I knew that wasn’t the end. I don’t think I’m going down a black hole: I’m ascending, not descending. But I was afraid of leaving my kids behind. That’s what terrifies me more than anything: not having those moments with my kids.”

He was later told that just one in 10 patients in his condition pull through, with most “choking out” due to organ paralysis — a fate which struck two other patients in his ward while he was there. But Copeland survived — just about. Months of painstaking rehab followed, with the consultants telling Jenny there was no guarantee he’d walk, talk or eat normally again.

To meet Copeland now, you’d be hard pressed to see any difference between him and most active 47-year-olds. It’s only when he does the rounds of his body, detailing the damage, that the lasting trauma becomes clear.

“The lungs are fine, but because my cerebellum is damaged, it doesn’t send the message to the lungs to work. The consultant said, ‘We know what the hardware does. We just don’t know what the software does, and we can’t tell you why.’”

Soon after being admitted, Copeland had a feeding tube inserted into his stomach, but it wouldn’t hold because he had too much muscle in the area. Instead he was fed through the nose, and only able to absorb 250 calories a day — a 10th of what the average man needs. He dropped from 11 stone to seven.

It was eight weeks before he could swallow food, some mashed potato with gravy, but even now, 22 months on, he still can’t keep food down, vomiting 10 or 15 minutes after each meal. But enough stays in to keep him going. “I have it better than being fed through a tube,” he says.

The right side of his body is “completely numb, dead” and so is the left side of his face. “I can’t feel sharp, numb, blunt, hot, cold. I know I’m being touched but I don’t know to what extent.” He develops sores on the side of his mouth due to dribbling he can’t control and he’s unable to smile or wink on one side. “You’re 45,” his consultant once joked. “Who are you gonna be winking at?”

Through it all, his medical team have been outstanding. In Beaumont, physio Sonya McConnell helped him retrain the connection between his brain and limbs. Another

physio, Sarah Burke, would visit him at home in Howth after his release, taking him to the beach in Sutton so he could learn to run again on soft sand. When Copeland’s right foot hits the ground, he can’t feel the contact so if the surface is uneven, he often falls. As a result, he runs with his hands out from his body, the way a child moves along a balance beam.

He still runs every morning on soft sand and typically hits the deck once or twice. But it doesn’t deter him. “Everything that seems impossible, I’ll give it my best shot,” he says. “I’d rather fall over than stay in my chair out of fear of falling. The faster I run, the better chance I have of staying upright.”

But that’s complicated by another factor: when Copeland’s heart rate goes over 145 beats per minute, the oxygen deficit in his brain results in clouded vision, essentially turning him blind. If he wants to race fast — and he does — he must run with a guide, who’ll count down the seconds to each corner: three, two, one, turn!

It’s not ideal. None of it is. But he can run. He can live. Maybe not quite as he once did. Maybe with lots of annoying terms and conditions attached. But he can do it, all the same. And so he’ll do it as well as he can.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” says Jenny, when I ask what she made of him racing a marathon in Antarctica. “As Ger would say, it’s a reason to live. Of course, me and his boys all are too. But this is the way he shapes his purpose in life. Knowing him before and after [the accident], this was his thing. In a way, it’s also a demonstration that he hasn’t let this change him.”

But, of course, much has changed. Copeland now has to sleep for 18 hours a day: 11 at night and seven during the day. He can’t go rock climbing or kayaking with his sons as he used to on weekends. “I miss being an active dad,” he says. “I find that hard, they find it hard. But I’m never angry and I never ask why it happened. I’ve a very strong faith system, and I believe everything happens for a reason.”

Not all the impacts are negative, though, and many parts of him are utterly unchanged.

“The positivity,” says Jenny. “He’s had a lot of experiences and he always helps me to stay positive. It’s not fate, but there’s reason to it. It’s easy to get frustrated in life but when you’ve a brain injury and get frustrated, it causes severe knock-on physical symptoms. His brain can’t take it anymore. That helps you, *forces* you, to not sweat the small stuff. One of the miraculous things about it is it didn’t impact Ger’s mind and we feel blessed for that. It impacted his brain but he is, at the core, himself.”

Still, there are constant reminders that things are different now. A few weeks ago, Copeland was getting Christmas decorations out of the attic and fell over. It’s hard in moments like this not to vent his frustration.

“I can’t lift things,” he says. “I’ve no balance. The things you take for granted, having a nice meal, you can’t do. I look fine, but let me tell you, I’m in constant pain. I’ve gastro-organ paralysis. Showers electrocute me: when [the water] hits the head, it gives me a shock. There’s days I’d fall over in the shower and scream, ‘What the f**k have you given to me, Jesus? Why?’ But you can’t ponder on that because it’ll eat you alive.”

In some ways, life is simplified. In others, it’s more complicated. One of those is financial. Unable to work, Copeland had to sell off his business. His health insurer refused to cover his medical expenses, which have risen close to €200,000. The reason? He ran that road race after returning home, and he couldn’t definitively prove that the dissected artery was caused by the accident in Morzine.

“We got legal advice and they said they’d rather spend two million fighting you rather than giving a two million payout,” he says.

Jenny, thankfully, has a high-ranking position at Bank of America, while Copeland bought properties during the good times and the rental income from those now keeps him afloat. “I’m down money, but money is not gonna make my cerebellum work. There’s dark days — I won’t lie. Am I suicidal once a week? Yes, I am. I get dark times, but they last 20 minutes. Life is good.”

There are upsides to all this, and Copeland



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Matthew Collins, left, and Ger Copeland during the 2025 Irish Life Dublin Marathon.
Photo: Ramsey Cardy

leans into them. “I’m a better person. I believe I am — emotionally, mentally. Look at Michael Schumacher. He was the statistic that didn’t come back. I want to be the statistic that does come back. I’ll never be me again, but I’m better than they ever imagined I’d be.”

On occasion, someone close to him will vent their frustration about the skier who crashed into him. But Copeland doesn’t go there. “He doesn’t know what he caused and I don’t want him to know — it’s not fair on him,” he says. “I could have caused this to anyone playing football. As my consultant says, there’s a better chance of winning the lotto than having this injury. That’s just how it is: a freak accident. I don’t ask why.”

The past isn’t changing, so he makes what he can of every day.

“I have my limitations. When you sleep for 18 hours a day, you wonder, ‘Am I just existing or living?’ But I still get up every day, I still run every morning. I can still go on the stationary bike, the swift trainer, the rowing machine. I don’t go to work, that’s frustrating, so I can’t

earn. But I give a lot of talks. I tell my story. I was a successful runner, a businessman, but it can all be taken away in the blink of an eye.”

The one thing he won’t do? Wallow in self-pity. “It’s wasted energy. What are you going to gain? Nobody is getting anything out of, ‘Bah humbug, my life is over.’ I know I have five or six years left. People are worse than me and people are not as bad as me. Nobody knows what’s around the corner, so I’m living day by day, putting my best version out there.”

In the first few weeks after the accident, as he learned to walk again, his friend Anthony Lee visited him in Beaumont and one of the first pledges Copeland made was that he’d join Lee on the start line at the Dublin Marathon later that year. It looked a long shot but if all he could be was a six-hour pacer, well, then Copeland promised to haul himself around with a Zimmer frame.

Jenny recalls how he attacked his physical therapy with that marathon in mind. “They had Xs on the floor and he’d to move his foot



(Top) Then Lord Mayor of Dublin James Geoghegan, presented the Lord Mayor's Medal to Ger Copeland in October 2024.

from one to the other to retrain his brain to know where his foot was supposed to go. He'd do it all day, hundreds of times more than he needed to. They had a stationary bike and right away he asked them to bring that in. He was cycling and watching cycling tours on TV. That's just who he is — totally determined."

In October 2024, seven months after suffering a stroke and multiple brain haemorrhages, Copeland lined up in Dublin and clocked a remarkable 3:06.50 alongside Lee. He was awarded the Lord Mayor's Medal to acknowledge his comeback.

One of those paying attention to his story was Richard Donovan, an ultramarathoner who organises adventure races around the world, including the Antarctic Polar Race. He invited Copeland to compete in its 2025 edition, staged in conjunction with the Lion's Head Marathon in Cape Town. Doing two marathons on two continents in under 24 hours is extreme for anyone. For someone with Copeland's issues, many might deem it madness. He jumped at the chance.

And so, in mid-November, Copeland flew to South Africa, toeing the line on a hot, sunny, Saturday morning. He ran with Lee for the first eight miles, but with his guide suffering in the heat, Copeland forged ahead, taking victory over a small field in 3:38. Several hours later, he boarded the chartered flight that took competitors 2,500 miles south to Wolf's Fang in Antarctica — just 1,200 miles from the South Pole.

The plane touched down on a icy blue runway shortly after midnight, the frozen landscape still drenched in light given the sun had only barely dipped below the horizon. The temperature was -12C but around -25C accounting for wind chill. Soon after disembarking, Copeland realised he was drastically underdressed, retreating to a heated cabin to apply extra layers, with two neck scarves covering his face to protect against frostbite — something he had to be extra cautious of given the lack of feeling on one side of his face.

Wearing three sets of gloves, he set off to cover 26.2 miles with about 60 others, his fuel gauge already running close to empty given he'd been unable to eat since the marathon in Cape Town.

The race was run in tandem with the Antarctic leg of The Great World Race — seven marathons on seven continents in seven days — and as Copeland charged around the course, Jenny stayed up until the early hours back in Dublin to catch a glimpse of him on the live stream, going back to sleep once she saw he was OK.

Copeland ran the first half alongside the race doctor, Jack Watson, but after Watson stepped aside he was all alone. The freezing wind was cutting, almost crippling at times, blasting across the icy tundra, and most competitors were reduced to walking as they squared up to it. Some returned to the heated aid stations after each lap and were unable to haul themselves back out — their bodies bashed, spirits broken.

Marathoners who would usually coast under three hours all struggled to break four, but Copeland managed it, despite a few falls, crossing the line in 3:56.57. He won the Antarctic Polar Race by almost two hours, though the competitor in him wished he'd pushed on sooner, given he was just 15 seconds shy of beating everyone in the other marathon being run alongside.

Through the second half, with his heart rate

rising, all he could see was a foggy haze. It took two days for his vision to return.

Donovan has now suggested a similar event at the North Pole, though in addition to extreme adventures, Copeland also wants to race fast. At the Dublin Marathon last October, he clocked 2:58.23 alongside his guide, Matt Collins — below the qualifying standard for partially-sighted runners for the last Paralympics.

For the Los Angeles Games in 2028, the standard is 2:55 and Copeland thinks he can hit that this year. He knows it might not earn him a place at the Games given Paralympics Ireland will only send its top medal chances. Still, he'll give it a shot — proving what's possible for those living with a permanent brain injury.

He has other causes, too. By running in Antarctica, Copeland raised over €3,000 towards the construction of a family room at Beaumont Hospital so the loved ones of patients can have a proper place to wait, or grieve, in times of crisis. "I'd prefer if that was €30,000," he says. "That's where people need their privacy. If you're dying, give them some dignity."

By telling his story, he hopes others living with brain injuries can find a spark of inspiration. "Life is not over. There are days where it's hopeless. You soil yourself, you fall over, your legs don't work sometimes. But I don't get embarrassed by that. How could I not celebrate life?"

Each week, he gets dozens of messages from those impacted by his comeback, and they strengthen his belief that he's making a difference. His faith also infuses him with great purpose.

"Nobody likes talking about faith systems anymore, you're nearly mocked if you say you're a Christian. But it works for me. We all need something and I'd rather that than to be sinking into a pint or snorting something up my nose to make myself feel like I used to. I've never done any of that but for a long time I was addicted to winning. Running and being competitive was my thing."

It still is, and that clock is always ticking, gauging in clear, objective numbers his success or failure on race day. Of course, that other clock is also ticking.

There is no known cure for Copeland's brain injury, but he has volunteered for research in London and New York, knowing that while it probably won't save him, it might help others in the future. The artery dissection he suffered happens to just 3,000 people worldwide each year so there's scant research in the area, with the UFC funding some of late given several fighters have faced such organ paralysis from the same issue.

Copeland plans to also volunteer for stem cell research, which might help with the nerve damage. "But it won't help the cerebellum," he says. "It won't help my lungs or intestines. The software sending the message is all damaged. That's damage for life."

He doesn't torment himself with hopes of a magic elixir. He knows his condition will deteriorate again down the line. So he utilises what he has now.

"I celebrate the shit out of everything. Why? You don't know. It could be your last chance. Five years from now, I'll be back in my wheelchair, I'll probably be PEG fed again. That's just a given but until that happens, I'll fight to the best of my ability."

A while back, his son sent him a social media post: 'Sometimes you have to lose your old life to appreciate your new life.'

That's exactly how Copeland sees it. All the days he has now feel like extra time, an unexpected encore. He lives and runs and he's relishing every note. "I've a beautiful wife, beautiful kids, I get a second bite of the apple. How can I not be happy?"

As Jenny says: "He could have been gone. That would have been the unthinkable outcome. It does bring that appreciation and perspective that is, in the end, a positive thing in life."

Which brings us back to the original question: Is Copeland lucky or unlucky? Maybe it's a bit of both. But from where he's standing, and the direction in which he's running, it sure doesn't feel that way.

"I'm the luckiest f**ker in the world."