

Cathedral home to champion runners

By: [Estelle Tran](#)

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The elevators at the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning are notorious for being slow and inconvenient. But that doesn't bother Pitt alumnus Danny Chew.

He likes to climb the stairs - as fast as he can.

Chew, 45, set the current record for the fastest time running from the ground floor to the 36th floor and back in 1993. He ran the stairs in 3 minutes and 38 seconds, a record that has remained untouched for 15 years.

Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of the day Chew set the record for the most consecutive runs up the Cathedral stairs. On this day, Chew ran up the stairs 101 times in 17 hours and 48 minutes:

[I Stepclimbed 44,444 feet in 18 Hours on February 10 & 11, 2007](#)

[He posts the official building records on his website.](#)

"The record that I'm proudest of was the most consecutive times up, 101 times beating my old record of 86 times. However, I'm very proud of my record for my fastest time up because it's stood for so long," Chew said.

However, not everyone climbs the stairs with aspirations of earning a place on Chew's website. Many athletes climb the stairs just to stay in shape during the winter months.

At the Cathedral, runners, cyclists, hikers, triathletes and mountaineers find a common place to exercise inside, away from the winter weather.

Stair runner Stephen Cummings holds the record for the fastest time running up the stairs while touching every step with a time of 4 minutes and 50 seconds. But Cummings is a cyclist at heart.



Media Credit: [Michael Heater](#)

Danny Chew (left) climbed 36 floors of the Cathedral in 3 minutes and 38 seconds, a record that still stands. Rob Masterson is on the right.

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"Cyclists often lose bone density doing their sport. They can get slightly osteoporotic," Cummings said. "It's so low impact that we actually lose muscle and bone mass. That's why it's recommended to do load bearing exercise similar to cycling, like running stairs, in the winter."

Chew thinks that running the stairs is a great fitness test for different kinds of athletes.

"It is a neutral ground for runners and bikers to meet and neither really has an advantage over the other. We don't want to go on each other's turf," Chew said.

Mountaineers use the Cathedral stairs to train for climbing Mt. Washington or Mt. Everest. Chew said these adventurers often carry backpacks that weigh up to 80 lbs. and special four-pound shoes that cost \$750.

He figured that 12 runs up the stairs is a vertical mile. Fifty-five trips up the stairs is the equivalent of scaling Mt. Everest starting at sea level, but most people start at 12,000 ft.

With all these people running the stairs in the evenings, there can be a lot of traffic, said Cummings.

"Sometimes the Pitt rugby team runs the stairs. It's like a herd of buffalo coming down. You can hear them from three floors away. It's pretty scary because I'm a small guy," he said. "It's like from that movie 'Dances with Wolves' when he heard the buffalo coming a day in advance. But it's really not safe to run down the stairs."

Pitt student and two time Ironman participant Brian Gierl said that the traffic usually is not an issue because people usually take the elevators down and people usually run in small groups. Triathletes are known to dominate the stairs on Thursday nights.

Yet he maintains it's a friendly community and the stair climbers are not cliquey.

"I guess you make friends because you kind of do that same thing, and you talk on the way down in the elevator. We go at different paces. I should hope I'm going faster than the guys with 80-pound packs on their backs," Cummings said.

On Wednesday nights, Chew runs with two or three sets of people because "no one wants to go as long."

To his knowledge, no one has gone as long. Over the last 30 years, Chew has climbed the Cathedral stairs more than 3,300 times. Since there are 764 steps to climb in the Cathedral, Chew scaled over 2.5 million steps since he started to keep track.

Before running the stairs, Chew recommends that every runner learns the building. He explained that there are only two stairways that lead to the top - stairwells A and G. Stairwell A is the most direct route. By taking stairwell G, the runner needs to run through a hall on floor 31, but the runner passes a water fountain this way.

Chew openly shares his stair climbing techniques with anyone who wants advice. When making the 180

degree turns on the landings, he plants his foot in such a way that he only has to put one foot on the landing. This sheds fractions of seconds off his time.

"It's hard to get into the groove until the 14 and a half floor because the stairs are too wide," he said.

All of the runners have their own keys to success ranging from wearing cheap \$30 Nikes to varying their paces.

Frequent stair climber Jon Osborne likes to detach himself from his surroundings.

"I listen to the same song. I don't look at the floor numbers, and I do long division in my head to distract me."

Cummings makes sure not to run too fast so his heart rate doesn't spike. After running too hard, the heart spikes in about 50 seconds. Cummings likes to run with Chew to keep him on pace.

When Chew goes for a record, he stocks bananas, snack cakes, fig bars and gallons of mixed Gatorade on the top floor to consume while waiting for the elevator or riding the elevator down.

Cummings said that running the stairs is "exercise fun." The athletes find their own amusement by running with friends, listening to music or taking in their surroundings.

Gierl said, "Sometimes I see these dust bunnies that are enormous. They are like the size of feet," he said. "There's not too much excitement on the stairs. I've never found anyone trying to join the 34-floor-high club."

In addition to the dozens of regulars who run the stairs at the Cathedral, many people run the stairs for a physical challenge.

Pitt alumnus and casual stair runner Harold Baguion explained what keeps him coming back to the Cathedral stairs.

"It tires you out fast. It's not like running because you can keep going when you get tired running. But you just have to keep going, even if you have to crawl," Baguion said. "You usually just pass out at the top, but when you get there you really feel accomplished. Plus you get a great view."