

First Time

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE OF A LONG-TIME GOAL

Runner Dave Schetzle completes his first marathon

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, November 6, 2005

This is the eleventh in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region.

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DETROIT — Everything was going fine. Dave Schetzle was running smooth.

For 16 long miles.

Then ... leg cramps.

He stopped and began to stretch his thigh and — wham!

"My hamstring just felt like it popped," he said, remembering that painful feeling, the stinging kind you get in the middle of the night when you wake up with a charley horse.

It's the sort of moment that can make or break a 43-year-old running his first marathon, a man who made finishing such a race one of his life goals.

It's also the kind of thing Dave worried about as he stood near the starting line with 13,000 other people taking part in the Detroit Free Press/Flagstar Bank Marathon.

"The big fear for me is the unknown," he said. "How am I gonna feel? Am I gonna be able to finish?"

As he warmed up with his training partner Mike Dick, poised in a sea of people to start the race at 7:35 a.m., with only four hours of fitful sleep to call upon for help, his mind silently raced.

"My reaction is I get quiet. That's the way I handle it. My mind is going," he said.

Just being here was the result of four months of gut-wrenching training that often left the West Toledo bachelor too tired to do anything but watch television and forced him to pass up other social opportunities.

In the seven weeks leading up to the race, he and his tall, lanky body ran between 15 and 30 miles every week with his training partners, usually with trips of about five miles on certain weekdays and longer runs on the weekend. Among them was a particularly brutal, spirit-breaking, 18-mile trip from Grand Rapids to the Value City Department Store in Maumee.

"It drizzled and rained and was cool and it was just horrible," Dave remembered. "I had a throbbing knee. I thought I was going to have to stop. Those are the days you ask yourself why you're doing it. I could not have gone another seven or eight miles that day to do a full marathon."

There were good days too, though, when he and his training partners talked the whole way through and the miles flew by like a symphony playing in tune.

Even on these days, there was more to their success than just the mechanics of running.

"We approach it a lot like a science," Dave said. "There are things to eat two days before, one day before. ... We're pretty much doing things by the book."



Dave Schetzle (No. 7208) recently ran his first marathon in Detroit. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

There are other tricks, too. Like combatting chafing by wearing a substance called Bodyglide on your thighs and Band-Aids over your nipples.

Running had always been a big part of Dave's life, from cross country and track beginning in junior high to practicing with the teams at Gateway Middle School, where he teaches U.S. history, and the occasional 5k and 10k race.

Everything just seemed better when he ran - his breathing, allergies, diet - and there's the legendary "runner's high." And for a solitary sport, there sure was a nice social aspect to it, running with other teachers, like Chris Drage and Mike, or the Toledo Roadrunners Club.

For 15 years, though, running a full marathon of 26.2 miles seemed like an impossible Everest to him, an unfulfilled item on his page-long list of life goals that also includes visiting Paris and singing in a public performance.

"I had almost given up on that one," he said.

But his running buddies nagged him and eventually he completed a couple of half-marathons.

"It just kind of hit me this spring that I got in good enough shape for a half-marathon, and if [a full marathon] was gonna happen, it better happen now," he said.

That's how he found himself here in Detroit outside Comerica Park in the pre-dawn hours. So many people were packed in the street next to him that it took more than four minutes just to reach the starting line after the gun went off.

Things didn't get much better as he and Mike crossed the Ambassador Bridge into Canada, where the crowd was large enough to keep them from passing anyone and staying with the pace they wanted to set.

At about 40 degrees with some sun, it was a perfect day for a run. The scenery was stunning - when they thought to look at it - as they ran a course littered with clothes discarded by other racers.

Lining the streets were thousands of people cheering, marching bands playing, even a woman singing Sara Evans' "Suds in the Bucket." He passed by some of his students, who were there to cheer for someone else, but who saved a big roar for him.

"You can't imagine how much little things like that can pick you up," Dave said.

At about the 11-mile mark, Mike, a more accomplished runner, took off ahead as planned. Dave met up with Mike's wife and changed clothes and shoes, an atypical move that meant a delay of a few minutes but one that promised a little more comfort.

Then came the cramp at Mile 16 (which afflicted Mike at about the same time). At first he tried to jog four minutes, then walk a minute. Before long that became: jog three minutes, walk one minute. Then jog two minutes, walk two minutes.

The pair's best guess is that they weren't hydrated enough, having missed the first couple of water stations because things were so crowded. They probably should have started drinking Gatorade sooner to replenish lost sodium and potassium, and it didn't help that the course was unforgiving concrete rather than the softer Metroparks paths they often used for training.

Determined, they trotted on, though with a herky jerky motion more like marionettes than practiced runners.

"The breathing was not a problem. The mind was not a problem ... I realized, push come to shove, I could walk the rest of the way," Dave said. "Psychologically, I was fairly positive. I was enjoying the crowds."

As the last few miles approached, he met an angel named Sue, a former favorite student of his from his days teaching at Central Catholic High School. She was running her first marathon, too, and ran along side him for a while.

There was no doubt he was going to finish when they parted ways, but from this point on he ran with a smile.

Crossing the finish at the 50-yard line of Ford Field, his face beaming across the Jumbotron, Dave was choked with emotion, exhilaration.

"That was really awesome," he said afterward, still at a loss for words to describe the feeling.

Final time: 4 hours, 36 minutes, 55 seconds. (The winner crossed the finish line over two hours earlier.)

Dave hasn't decided if he'll run another marathon, but he's leaving the door open if the circumstances are right.

"Boy, I had a lot of thoughts the last seven or eight miles: I'll never do this again," he said over breakfast the next day, feeling bruised but ready to move on. "I've already rethought it. Today I'm thinking: What could I do different next time?"

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