

My Most Unforgettable Marathon

(And What I Learned From It)

BY PATTI CATALANO DILLON

*You can have anything you want, if you want it badly enough.
You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to
accomplish, if you hold to that desire with singleness of purpose.*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, October 24, 1976—My most unforgettable marathon has to have been my first one. It was the inaugural Ocean State Marathon in Providence, Rhode Island, in the fall of 1976. But ironically, what I remember most are the events that led up to the race, not the race itself.

I had started running barely 11 months before this first marathon because I wanted to lose weight. I never ran in high school or college. As I recall, I weighed 107 when I graduated from Sacred Heart High School in Weymouth, Massachusetts, but in the five years since then, I had gained 45 pounds.

I had attended Quincy Junior College, where I majored in kiddy whist and beer. I had worked as a nurse's aide all through high school and was still doing that job many years later. I loved it. But I was getting kind of tired of my life. I just really got tired. I knew there was more to life. I was very unhappy with the way things were going for me.

Many times a group of the nurses with whom I worked would go out after work and have a few drinks, and I'd join them. I worked the second shift, from 4:00 P.M. to midnight. This going out for a few drinks after getting off work at midnight eventually developed into a lifestyle. First it was Thursday nights, then I added Fridays, and then every other Saturday night as well.

I was around women—married women—and I was the only single one in the group. One night in March, I just got tired of listening to them complain about their husbands. I'd said: "If you don't like it, leave!" And somebody threw that back at me: "Look at you! Look who's talking!" (Only she didn't say it quite so nicely.) And I sat back and took stock of that. I slid off the bar stool right then and there and didn't go back.

Meanwhile, a patient came into the hospital. She had a very unusual last name: Hajjar. And I thought to myself: *I wonder if that's the same family as this girl I went to school with.* And it turned out that it was. It was her mother. I hadn't seen her since we graduated. When the girl came in to visit her mother, she looked stunning! Navy-blue suit, briefcase, slim, educated, confident. I'm seeing this, and here I am, this lowly scrub-the-floor-and-empty-the-bedpans aide. And I thought: *Oh, my gosh!* She looked so happy. I knew what I was missing. I wasn't happy, and I didn't know what to do about it or how to get myself happy.

TIME FOR A SELF-ASSESSMENT

I just remember sitting there looking at how big my thighs were and thinking: *I feel awful. I look awful.* I'm imagining that everybody I went to high school with had graduated from college, had these big fabulous jobs, and here I was, Miss Zilch.

I wanted to lose weight, and I was tired of dieting, so I wanted to burn my calories off—not that I knew at that time what a calorie was—and I realized that I wasn't living my life, it was living me. I went so far as to make a 24-hour journal to see what I was doing with my time, where it all went. And as I looked at it, I had a very simple thought: *My life really stinks.*

At that time, I knew what everybody in my life liked. I knew what my brothers and sisters liked. I knew what my family liked. I knew what my boyfriend liked. I knew how they liked their food cooked. But nobody knew what I liked—especially me. I decided to start a be-nice-to-Patti campaign. I would be nice to myself for one hour a day.

I started by riding my bike, like I did when I was a kid. But I got whacked in the butt and thrown over the handlebars when some wiseguy in the passenger seat of a car coming up behind me slapped me in the butt. So I decided that I wasn't going to do that anymore.

I decided to try swimming for a while. I had actually competed in swimming when I was younger. But I went to the YMCA one day, and the pool was closed. This wasn't going to work. I needed something that I could do on my own, not depending on anybody for anything. Then I bought a book called *Aerobics* by Dr. Ken Cooper, and I learned what calories were, and I learned that jogging burns more calories than biking or swimming, and I thought: *Hey! I'll try this jogging thing.* And so that's what I did.

The book said to wear your most comfortable clothes and your most comfortable shoes, and my shoes were Earth Shoes. I wore them for months as I started to run, along with cutoff jeans. And since my father was a boxer and I'd seen him at the gym wearing the neoprene sweat belt, I wore one of those. It made sense to me at the time.

The first day I went out to run, I went to the cemetery in Quincy, because I didn't want anybody to see me. And I ran around it—seven times. I didn't know at the time that it was a one-mile loop.

On the sixth time around, a police car came up—remember that this was at a time when very few women were running, and the police headquarters was across the street from the cemetery—and he said, “Excuse me. Can I ask what're you're doing?”

“I'm running.” (I assumed it was obvious.)

“Oh—Well, all right,” he said.

So he left. Remember, it was a different time, and here I was all red-faced, black circles under my eyes, sweat pouring down my face, and I'm running onward to yet another lap. Later on, I had several doctors tell me I should stop running! “Running isn't for women,” they said, and “What about your babies in the future?” Stupid, stupid, stupid stuff. I had had so much of people telling me to stop. At work, when I began winning races, someone actually asked me why I would take a trophy from a little kid. The few people who encouraged me, I held onto.

THE FIRST DAY OF A NEW LIFE

Anyway, after that first run, I went back to the Y to take a shower, and I opened the door to the locker room, and I could feel the breeze from the swinging door. . . . It felt so good. And I remember peeling off my layers, and I was soaked with sweat. There was nothing left, I was so spent. I took a shower, held the nozzle, and put my face into it and I said, “Oh, man, this is just the best!” And I cried. I actually cried, and I'm not a crying person. I had never in my life had such an experience as this jogging gave me. I was not only happy, I was full of glee.

And I knew that's where I wanted to live. I knew that's what I wanted.

I weighed myself when I got home, and I had lost 3 pounds and I thought, *Ooh, ooh, I could lose 21 pounds in a week!* But I didn't really know. I had not a clue.

And the best cigarette I ever had was the one I had as soon as I got home. That was the best time to have a cigarette, after a run. Ask people who smoke. It still tastes good. (No, I no longer smoke, but I sure did then.)

So I went to work for my afternoon shift later that day, and I told people I ran. Oh, that's nice, they'd say. And the next day, I could barely get out of bed, I was so sore. I really thought things were going to fall off, that I'd done too much, that this was against the law. The soreness lasted almost two weeks. But as soon as I could, I did it again.

And the same thing happened, but the soreness didn't last a full two weeks. And then I did it again. I looked forward to getting that feeling again. I couldn't put my hand on it, I couldn't grab it, but I knew it was mine. And nobody could give it to me and nobody could take it away.

Before I knew it, I stood out. A woman who runs on a mission in Quincy—there weren't that many of us at that time—stood out.

At the Y, there was a marathon group; they trained for “Boston,” and they had just done the marathon there.

And although I'd been born and raised less than a dozen miles south of Boston, I'd never heard of the Boston Marathon.

I remember people talking in hushed, almost reverential tones, “Oh. *That* guy did the Boston Marathon, and *that* guy did the Boston Marathon. You don't dare even say hello to these people.”

So I brazenly began to run with this group, and at first I could stay up with them for only a mile. But they were all talking about this Boston Marathon, and over the next few weeks, I found myself staying up with them longer because I wanted to hear their stories. One day, it must have been in May, I just blurted out, “I'm gonna do the Boston Marathon.”

One guy looks at me. “Oh, yeah? Did you know you have to qualify?”

“Really? What do you have to do?” I gamely asked.

“You've got to run a marathon,” he said. And I'm thinking: *You've got to run a marathon to do a marathon?* And I'm thinking further: *Me and my big mouth.*

But I said: “Oh, yeah? Which one?”

And he said, “There's a new marathon in Rhode Island that we're all going to do.”

And I said, “Really? Well, what do you have to do to qualify for Boston?”

And he said, “Well, women have to do 3:30 and we men have to do three hours.”

And I said: “Really. Hmm. 3:30. Well, how far is it?”

And they looked at me as though I'd just been dropped from a flying saucer and said: “Twenty-six-point-two miles.”

And I had not a clue what that meant. It meant absolutely nothing to me.

HOW LONG IS 26 MILES, ANYWAY?

And I'm thinking: Boston Marathon. Twenty-six-point-two miles. Can I run 26 miles? How long would it take? And I don't know. Twenty-six miles? But while I'm listening to them, I'm also looking at them—not just at their physicality, but really *looking* at these guys—and I know I have it over some of them.

And I thought to myself: “Well, if they can do it—”

And so I registered for the new marathon.

At this time I was still smoking, still working full-time, running a few races here and there—five miles, 10 miles; there was no such thing as a 5K at the time—and I'm winning. This is the thing: I'm winning. And it feels good. It's feeding me. I'm getting attention in a positive way.

As far as these guys went, I knew vaguely who was who. That guy's a lawyer; that guy's a detective; that guy's a judge. And they're talking to me, asking me questions about my training. And I'm like, "Yeah, I try to run every day, sometimes an hour, sometimes 40 minutes." And I'm just loving it because we're all in running clothes, and we're all equal, and I'm feeling comfortable. I'm not Patti, the nurse's aide; I'm not my mother's daughter. I just ran the race—I'm the girl who won!—and it is . . . pretty cool.

In the meantime, I was engaged to this military guy. I called him "the captain." And he didn't like me running. He said, "I don't know about this running thing." He said it had changed me. But I knew that running had brought out things in me that I liked. I wasn't going to be pushed around and used anymore.

So we had a big fight. He left. I continued to run, and I ran and I ran. He came back and told me I had to quit running—but he was going to give me six months. *He* was going to give *me* six months—to get it out of my system.

I had to sneak around to run. I had to make excuses why I didn't want to go out with the girls after work—because I wanted to get up and run in the morning. And it gave me life. It was my life. It was wonderful. I didn't want anybody to come and take it away.

During this six months, I continued on with the runners at the Y. I kept listening to their stories. I wanted to be a part of this group. I loved the running, and I loved what they had, and I wanted to be a part of it, and so—Guess what!—I married one of the guys in the group—a month or two before my first marathon.

At the time of the marathon, my longest run had been 16 miles, and I ran it once and took the rest of the week off. I thought something bad would happen to my body. I was still smoking—I still hadn't made the connection—I just liked the camaraderie, being part of the group, being accepted—being accepted as, well, Patti.

After running in my Earth Shoes for months—I'm a forefoot striker, and the Earth Shoes were very good for that—I finally bought my first pair of running shoes, SL76s by adidas. They were the hardest shoe I ever ran in, and I made the usual mistake: they were too short. But what did I know? They didn't have many running shoes at the local sporting goods store. The shoes were green, and to match them I bought boys' gym shorts—green—and a boys' white T-shirt with green trim. There was nothing for girls or women at that time.

IT'S A GOOD DAY TO DIE

The day before the race, I went down to my mother's house. She wasn't there, but my little sister was in the kitchen—she was 8—and I said, "Oh, Maureen. I need to hug you."

We're not a demonstrative family, and she said, "Uh, OK."

And we're hugging and I said, "I'm going to run a race tomorrow—a marathon."

"A marathon," she said. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's 26 miles."

And I said, "I need to hug you because"—and I looked at her ever so seriously—"because I may die of a heart attack."

And she looked at me wide eyed: "Really?"

"Uh-huh. I may really die," I said, "but I'm going to do it anyway. I don't care."

I found out later that I was a competitor. But at the time, I didn't know I was a competitor. I was someone who couldn't even take an item back to the store to return it, who couldn't speak up in class.

But I went to the race, and I remember lining up ready to face death if I had to. I wasn't afraid at all, not nervous, just ready to die. It was rather nice to have those feelings . . . something new. I was bound and determined to run this race come what may.

I didn't have any idea how I was going to run the race. I was just going to go out and run it. My highest mileage week up to then was 42. (Since then I've occasionally gotten that much mileage in a day.) My diet was still, like, Cheese Curlys and Diet Pepsi—that's what I was running off of, that and cigarettes. Along the way, though, I had been asking questions: What can I do to get better? Sit-ups? OK. I did sit-ups. Push-ups? OK. And what else can I do? Quit smoking? Uh-uh! I'll think about that training secret.

So anyway, we started the race as a group. The course was one small loop and two big loops. And after the small loop, which was about a 10K, they asked, "Are you going to be all right now?"

"Yeah, fine, fine, fine," I said, and so my husband and his buddies left me, and all I know is that when it started to get painful—because I'd heard all these stories about marathons—all I know is that the harder it got, the harder I was going to run.

The funny thing is I don't remember anything at all about the race. I don't have any memory of the race—really—no pain or anything. I just remember it was cool and overcast. Leaves were blowing. There was a head wind along the water.

And I was running and running, and then I remember hearing, "And here she is, Patricia Latora of Quincy, Mass." And I remember coming through the chute and people are going "Whooo-oooo!" And I remember thinking, "That's it?" The marathon seemed short.

And I remember seeing my time and thinking, "I qualified!!!" And I came through the chute, and who do I see? I see my husband, and I said, "Hey, how'd you do?" I'm thinking he's already done and showered.

And he says, “OK. I got a PR—I did a 2:53.”

“2:53!” I said. “I did a 2:53:40. I was right behind you.” And I blurted out: “If I knew I was so close, I would have beat ya!” I didn’t mean any harm. I was just funning. But I had changed—and the marriage changed.

When I got into the women’s shower room after the race, I was the only one there for some time. “Hello?” I hollered. Nobody answered. Which was good, because I was struggling to take off my T-shirt. I couldn’t move my arms up over my head, they hurt so much. At the time I didn’t know why; what with the hard pumping, driving arm motion, I’d worn my arms out.

WHERE ARE THE OTHER WOMEN?

Well, when the other women finally began to come in—Mary Sherr, Carol Goodwin, and Sara Mae Berman—the first question they asked was, “Who are you?” Then, “Where did you come from? Why haven’t we heard of you before?” And, “This is your *first* marathon?”

I got the biggest trophy I had ever seen in my life: a 4-foot-tall monstrosity. It barely fit in the car. I was beaming, needless to say. People congratulated me. They were nice to me. I was in wonderland. Not only did I run and finish the marathon—I qualified for Boston! And I lived! I didn’t die!

I have not been able to match that feeling since.

I’ve set three American records in the marathon. I’ve been second

► Patti, shown here in the 1978 New Bedford Half-Marathon, very quickly became a world-class runner.



Peter Wallan / Hochmuck Swamp Rat

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three times in the Boston Marathon. I was the first American woman to break 2:30. I finished behind the greatest marathoner of that time, Grete Waitz. I got invited to marathons around the world. But the most memorable was that first one. If I had not done it, I would have done no others.

And funny as it sounds, I cannot recall the steps. I cannot recall the steps at all. But I went on to win this marathon five times—the only woman to do so—setting a new course record each time.

Going into the race, all I knew was that when it started to hurt, I was going to run harder—something I continued to do throughout my running career. I think I actually ran the next day. And yes, I continued to smoke. I hadn't made the full connection yet about my health—that was to come later. And yeah, me and my husband soon got divorced.

So even though I had started running to lose weight, I forgot all about that soon enough. I was on to something else all together.

At the time I really couldn't put my finger on it. All I knew is that it felt good. And since nobody could give it to me, nobody could take it away. It was mine; I owned it.

Running was a freeing up.

It gave me life.

And What I Learned From It

When you find something in life that stirs your passion, don't let it get away. Embrace it and squeeze it for all it's worth.

When it starts to hurt in a race, run harder. When things in life get hard, work harder at it.

Don't be afraid of the unknown. More times than not, it turns out to be something worth getting past the anxiety.

Don't put the burden of your happiness on someone else; we are responsible for creating our own happiness.

Give your toes plenty of room in your running shoe's toe box.

Don't overplan or overintellectualize your first marathon—just go and do it.

Train and race with people who are faster than you; it will make you faster—maybe, ultimately, even faster than they are.

Dream big, but don't be discouraged if it takes a lot of little steps to reach your dream.

Do I have to say it? Don't smoke. And if you do, stop.

