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QUEST FOR THE HOLY QUAL—BOSTON, THAT IS

It all began in 1979 when I ran my first marathon, The Avenue of the Giants in Northern California. “Wouldn’t it be great to run in the Boston Marathon someday!?” I asked myself. THE marathon of marathons—what an enticing goal. But by 1983 after running 10 marathons from Honolulu to Ottawa, with the San Francisco marathon being the final one, I had come nowhere near the qualifying time for Boston and had had enough of marathons. I quietly put to rest my fantasy of running in the Boston marathon—it was not to happen in this lifetime.

Fast forward 21 years during which time I continued to run—happily, regularly, and for varied distances, but never anything as long as a marathon. And then along came a free workshop in ChiRunning® that its founder, Danny Dreyer, put on for the Lake Merritt Joggers and Striders (LMJS) in 2004 and, as I pursued ChiRunning® Instructor training, I again began thinking about running marathons and qualifying for Boston. My new running style, based upon the principles of ChiRunning® (including such basics as integrated posture, relaxation and leaning with gravity) gave me hope that I still could run a marathon and could do so without extreme amounts of training mileage and without injury.

By Spring of 2005, I felt ready to try my first marathon in 22 years and I chose the most beautiful and challenging one around—Big Sur. Since my Boston qualifying time had risen with age over the years from about 3 hours to 4 hours, I must confess that I held out hope that I might qualify during my “re-entry” marathon in Big Sur. This was in spite of the official pre-race advisement that runners should expect to finish in about 25 minutes more than their normal marathon time due to the prevalence of significant hills, like Hurricane Point, on the course. They were right and I fell way short of my goal as I struggled across the finish line in 4:32. It had been both physically and emotionally a very challenging experience. Although I had done pretty well given the course, I had no idea if I could ever knock more than a half hour off my time no matter what the course—a necessary feat if I was to qualify for Boston.

Over the summer months I decided to take another crack at qualifying and chose an October marathon on what was said to be a reasonable course and a well supported race—the Portland Marathon, where the largest hill was a mere ramp onto a local bridge. Unfortunately, somewhere in the middle of the 26.2 miles, I lost focus and let my pace slip such that a strong finish was not enough to make up for lost time; consequently, I missed my qualifying time, albeit by a mere 8 minutes. So near and yet so far.

Well, one more try, I thought, and I'll either make it or give up on Boston for the time being. So, what better place to make my final attempt than the California International Marathon (CIM) from Folsom to Sacramento reputed to be one of the fastest marathon courses in the west. I again focused on quality rather than quantity in my training and approached the CIM with cautious confidence that I could run the whole race at a steady pace, with ease and good form and finish under 4 hours.

However, surface calmness was masking an underlying nervousness and anticipation about this major, personal sports challenge. During the night before the marathon, my subconscious was hard at work as I vividly dreamt that I woke up too late to make it to the 7 a.m. start. Luckily, reality was kinder than dreamland and once the buses delivered us, 5000 runners strong, to the brisk morning air of Folsom, I again could relax and contact the self-confidence that I had built up in the preceding weeks. And then we were off.

The first half of the marathon went smoothly and quickly as I used the downhills to my advantage while building up a nice deposit of several minutes in my Qualifier bank—a nice backup for later, if the going got tough. And it did. With 10 miles to go, I noticed that my mile splits were getting longer and my projected finish time was edging up towards the mid 3:50's and higher. Could I retain my focus and form in the final few miles? Would I be able to hang on and cross the line under 4 hours? With one mile to go I dug in deep, leaned a bit more and focused on keeping my cadence steady as I rounded the final bend. It was almost over, I could see the clock and then I was there—I had done it—3:58:38. I had made my goal of 26 years—my quest for the Qual was over—I was going to Boston.