



Marylee and Joe Schroeder at regional high school track.

Returning to Run Boston Marathon Was Never in Doubt for Seasoned Islander

Ivy Ashe Thursday, April 17, 2014 - 6:43pm

There will be about 9,000 runners in Wave Three of the 118th Boston Marathon this coming Monday, including Marylee Schroeder, 49, of West Tisbury. It's her eleventh time running Boston.

Much is the same as it was last year, when Marylee ran her 10th race. Husband Joe will be standing at mile 26, the corner of Hereford and Commonwealth, with son Mikey and daughter Whitney (the Schroeders' oldest daughter, Alexia, lives in Colorado). The family will stay in Boston for a mini-vacation afterwards.

Still, this year is different, with every runner and runner's family thinking of last year's horrific finish, when two bombs detonated on Boylston street, killing three and injuring more than 260. A remembrance ceremony was held in Boston on Tuesday, the anniversary of the 2013

marathon, honoring the victims and their families, as well as the first responders, emergency personnel and medical staff who provided services and support. A private ceremony honoring Krystle Campbell, Lingzi Lu and Martin Richards took place later in the day. But last year's bombing didn't make people less likely to want to run this year; it made them want to participate even more. It spurred an unprecedented show of solidarity around a race that is already best known for its outpourings of support. The Boston Athletics Association, which founded the race in 1897 and still sponsors it, estimates that more than 500,000 fans line the route each year. It's the largest spectator event in New England.

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Marylee ran Boston for the first time 12 years ago, but her memory of that event is so vivid it might have happened just last week. It was a warm day, with temperatures climbing into the 70s. The starting line in Hopkinton, on a quiet two-lane road lined with trees and a few houses on either side, is in all respects the inverse of the finish line 26.2 miles away in the busy heart of Back Bay. But it was nevertheless charged with restless energy. "You're in the crowd, there's so much hype," Marylee said. The gun fires, the runners take off, and for a while, she said, all you hear is the sound of running shoes hitting the ground. And then suddenly the route is "crazy with people," she said. "Cheering you on, giving you support, there's little kids wanting to give you high-fives."



Marylee and Chantal Desgagne, who will also run in Boston, take a hill on Skiff avenue in Vineyard Haven where they share the road with turkeys. — Ivy Ashe

Later, there's the scream tunnel at Wellesley College, which is exactly what it sounds like — a road lined with yelling college girls, audible from miles away. "It's this hum, and it gets closer and closer, and louder and louder...I got chills," Marylee said. Someone had told her before she ran that her quads would be screaming during the race, too, but she wasn't quite sure what that meant.

The marathon course is mostly a downhill one, so much so that it doesn't meet the standards for setting a world record marathon time. But in Newton a series of hills appear, culminating in Heartbreak Hill between miles 20 and 21.

"I remember getting to Heartbreak Hill, barely getting up it, and then having to crest it and go down," Marylee said. "I didn't think my legs were going to support me." And sure enough, she said, her quads were screaming.

"Your quads want to stop you, and so then when they get engaged to go uphill, you're just like Oh, my God," Joe said.

At the end of the race Joe met Marylee at the family area with a bicycle, so she wouldn't have to walk back on her exhausted legs.

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It is no easy feat to get to Boston in the first place, which is partially why the marathon is so storied. In other large marathons, you can sign up and show up. In those that have restricted fields, entrants are chosen via a draw, or they automatically qualify by posting a certain time. But for Boston, the only way in is through a qualifying time, and even that's no guarantee. A limited number of entries are also available for those running for charities.

Marylee started distance running thanks to running partner Anita Smith, who also helped her friend get started on a morning run schedule.

"I thought, wow, this is great," Marylee said. "For one thing, with our growing family, to get it done with was wonderful. And mostly likely in the afternoon I wouldn't even have time to run."

She had run just one long-distance race — the Vineyard 20-miler — when she signed up for a marathon in Lowell. What's another six point two miles, if you already know you can do 20, she thought.

But mile 20 is typically when the fabled Wall, the bane of marathoner's existence, shows up, and that was exactly what happened in Lowell. Marylee had to start walking. Still, she finished, and was encouraged by being just eight minutes off from the Boston Marathon qualifying time. The following year she ran the Hartford marathon, injured her knee during the race, and missed qualifying by six seconds.

"So what I did — which is not really recommended — is I ran another marathon," she said. Six weeks, bolstered by rehab sessions on a bike and a new knee strap, she and Vineyard marathon veteran Bill Brown went to Philadelphia to run. Bill paced her throughout the race, keeping her on track to qualify for Boston, and Marylee finished with a 3:35.

"He kept on saying, you know, Marylee, if you walked, you could qualify right now, and I was so happy. I knew I had it," she said.

"The rest is history, basically," she said. "I haven't stopped."

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These days Marylee has a set training routine, going out in the mornings with Anita or Chantal Desgagne, before her workday begins as the treasurer for the regional high school and up-Island regional school district. In the early days, though, it was Joe who helped her figure out a marathon plan. He has coached track and field at the high school since 1989, and cross country since its inception in the 90s. He's never run a marathon himself, but still knows a thing or two about helping athletes figure out their potential. With younger kids at the high school, that comes in the form of bolstering confidence.

"They don't realize what they can do until they actually try it," he said. "It's just having the confidence to know what you can accomplish. That's the biggest obstacle you have as a coach."

Marylee had a pretty good sense of where she could go as a runner, but needed some input on the best way to get there.

"I helped her out with training patterns and tapering and peaking," Joe said.

“I had no idea at all,” Marylee said. But she did have a love of running and the competitive spirit needed to power through a grueling race, which is just as important.

“You have to really dig deep, sometimes you just want to give up . . . even just to get up in the morning and go train,” Marylee said.

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One day last week Joe wore a marathon shirt to the West Tisbury School, where he is a physical education teacher. Oh, his students said, I like your unicorn. Why are you wearing a unicorn?

He hadn’t planned to have a marathon lesson, not really, but teachable moments are teachable moments even if they come from the unicorn mascot of the Boston Athletics Association.

“We talked a little bit about the marathon and what this year means more than other years,” Joe said. They talked about the history of the race and its community foundation. He told them Marylee was running, and gave the classes her bib number (19550) so they could follow her route online, which went over particularly well.

“They like that, any tech piece that you throw out there,” he said. They marveled at the fact that Marylee runs 26 miles — an insurmountable number to a seventh grader — and asked if Joe was afraid to be in Boston.

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The first bomb went off as he was heading back to the Rattlesnake, a bar on Boylston, to meet Marylee after dropping the kids off at their hotel.

“We were just like, what was that? It was like a sound you’d never, ever heard before,” Joe said. “It sounded like the biggest truck hitting a bridge at full speed.” But a sound could be anything, a blown gas line or a sewer problem, and even after Joe met up with Marylee at the Rattlesnake and the bartender turned on the TV, all that was visible on screen was smoke.

“So you didn’t realize that there were people involved,” Marylee said. It was only after texts started to flood their cell phones, asking if they were okay, that they got a sense of what was happening. They immediately went back to the hotel to be with Mikey and Whitney.

A text came in from Alexia, at school in Villanova, Pa., that said simply, Mom, are you there?

“That one text really got me,” Marylee said. “She had no idea where we were, what kind of situation we were in.”

The Schroeders packed up (after texting Alexia back) and checked out of the hotel, leaving the city as soon as state police opened Massachusetts avenue to traffic. They stayed in Quincy for the night. The next day, Marylee and Whitney went to Plymouth, and Joe and Mikey headed to North Carolina for a college visit to Mikey’s future alma mater.

“I think it helped us just to stay active,” Joe said. “Of course, when we came back, we would flick on the TV and see the whole thing over again.”

For Marylee, the enormity sank in when she got the Sunday Globe and saw the images from the finish line.

“That’s when it really hit me, I was like oh, my God, I can’t believe that actually really happened at the Boston Marathon,” she said.

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There was never a question that Marylee would run again this year.

“There’s nothing like it,” she said. “We lived in Boston for a year, and we used to go up and watch. Being a spectator is just amazing.”

As a spectator, Joe said, you see everything. The wheelchair athletes come first, and then handpowered vehicles. “And they just come flying by, just literally flying, and you don’t even realize they’ve gone 26 miles,” he said.

The elite men and women come next, often close on each other’s heels thanks to the staggered start times.

“That’s kind of special, to see that parade of athletes,” Joe said.

The elite race is expected to be a thrill this year, with local marathoner Shalane Flanagan of Marblehead hoping to take the victory.

“It’s going to be quite the race,” Marylee said. “In a way I wish I were there to watch it, too.”

But she has her own race to run.