

RUNNING WITH DAD

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In 1971 The Doors released "LA Woman," the Baltimore Colts defeated the Dallas Cowboys in Superbowl V, and Bob Gralley, age 45, laced up his first pair of running shoes.

This October 19th, my dad, now age 93, will be competing in the half marathon and his 17th Baltimore Running Festival. It's a special event; a homecoming celebration in Baltimore, and if all goes as planned, three generations of our family will cross the line, with dad, the Festival's oldest finisher.

The thick black binder on the top shelf his trophy room tells the story: Running in all the elements and over nearly five-decades, dad has logged over 55,000 miles—twice the distance around the globe. But he's modest about his accomplishments. "I started in the early days

before running became fashionable. If someone was running down the street in a pair of shorts, it'd be, 'What's the matter with that guy?'"

Running competitively for almost 50 years it seems like dad has always been that guy, the jogger, but growing up it was never his sport. Raised in Severna Park, dad built sailboats with his father and raced them on the Severn River. He played for the 1943 University of Maryland basketball team before enlisting in the Navy, serving in the Pacific in WWII. When he returned home from the war, mom and dad started a family, eventually raising three kids. They moved from the Baltimore area and my father began climbing the corporate ladder in New York City.

The doctor said dad's cholesterol was high,

and knowing his family had a history of heart disease, he started an exercise program. He began a slow jog on the streets of suburban Westport, Connecticut and eventually found other like-minded runners. A camaraderie developed and before long a group of fifteen sweaty men would show up in our basement on Saturday morning to laugh and drink ice tea after a five-to-ten-mile run.

They called themselves, jokingly, the Westport Athletic Club and though it was a loose-knit group dedicated to having fun, they pushed each other hard, began to ratchet up the miles, and entered competitive long-distance runs. Dad's first was the 1975 New York City Marathon. He competed against 500 other runners and ran a loop around Central Park. The race now covers the city's five boroughs and draws over 50,000 contestants.

My father never pushed me to run but I saw the fun he was having and it inspired me to think that maybe I could get into shape by running, too. It was 1982 and as an incentive, he offered to buy me a pair of running shoes if I ran 50 miles in a month. I took the challenge and got the shoes. I've been running ever since.

"Everyone chases something," dad would say. "Some chase women, some chase money, and some chase personal running records." He trained hard and often, and always pursued his personal running best. Dad got it in 1982 at age 56. He ran 3:04:26 in Boston and then to prove it wasn't a fluke, he ran that exact time the same year in New York. In those days, there wasn't a computer chip to measure individual performance; it took five-to-seven minutes to cross the starting line. Pushing 60 years of age, he would have been a sub-three-hour marathoner.

My dad is a competitive guy but he sacrificed his own time to help me through the pain of my first marathon. It was 1984 and the temperature was close to 80 degrees at race time in New York City. The heat rising from the pavement was unbearable and all around, runners were dropping out. But dad kept giving me cups of water to drink and douse my head, and he slowed his pace to run with me. Though he could run much faster than I, we crossed the line together, our hands clasped overhead in victory.

But naturally, as I improved my time

and began beating him, we started teasing each other about who was the better runner. Predictably, he would point to his PR and tell me I had no reason to crow until I held the family record.

When dad began to slow, he resorted to good-natured trickery to stay on top. Toward the end of our 20-mile training runs, he would try to fool me by pulling up lame or throwing my hat into the woods so he could sprint ahead and finish first. Once when I was aching and loopy after a 15-mile run, he bent over my feet to help tie my shoe laces. He knotted the long laces to both shoes together and dashed ahead. It became a running gag. Each time we went out for a long run I knew he'd try to trick me, but somehow I'd always fall for it. Afterwards, we'd laugh hard and collapse into each other's arms.

When mom and dad reached their mid-70s they moved back to Maryland and it seemed their lives traveled full circle. Mom, always a great supporter of dad's running, cheered him on, prepared pasta meals before big races, and offered moral support. And even though dad continued to slow he didn't complain. "Somehow, the older I get, the slower I get," he would say. He knew the days of personal bests were behind him but he still loved to compete. But now our roles had reversed: I gladly sacrificed my running times to run with my dad.

We both jumped at the opportunity to run through the streets of Baltimore when the Running Festival started in 2001. It was a homecoming for dad and having returned to the Baltimore area, it gave him a sense of completion. Since its beginning, we've run in nearly every Baltimore Running Festival. But when he reached 78, the full 26.2 miles became too much so we switched to the Festival's half marathon. It became our much-anticipated yearly event.

"You training for Baltimore?" dad would ask each Sunday I called. "I don't want to have to drag you over the line again." We'd both laugh. It seemed that advancing age hadn't dimmed his competitive spirit. When he turned 80 in 2006, I made tee-shirts for our Baltimore run. Mine read, "I'm running with the old guy," with an arrow pointing to dad. His read, "I'm

80. I'm the old guy." The crowd along the way was fantastic—responsive and enthusiastic in cheering us on. We passed a crowd of young runners and laughed when we heard a voice cry out, "I can't believe that old guy is kicking my butt!"

A few years later, my father's competitive spirit flared again on the streets of Baltimore. As usual, he gave me a few Tylenol before the race to ease the pain, and fed me a couple more at mile 10. I was sluggish like never before. It was like running in mud; I yawned at mile 12. He looked surprisingly fresh and took a special glee in stepping over the finish line just before me. On the ride home he confessed, said it was an accident, he didn't intend to give me Tylenol PM at the critical junctures of the race. But I knew better. Even in his 80s, dad was looking for the edge.

Over the decades of father-son rivalry, the love of the race has been transformed into a love for the run. The Baltimore Running Festival has become a joy-filled family event. My brother, Kevin, and his daughter, Sara—also from the Baltimore area—are running, too. Sara's the fast one among us now, but she holds back so all three generations can cross the finish line together. We look out for each other—help dad to stay on track and hydrated, just as he helped me nearly 40 years ago.

One of the greatest joys of my life has been the opportunity to run with my father these past 37 years. Our relationship has deepened and matured. He's never one to preach but through his quiet example I've learned the importance of having the right attitude toward the aches and pains of life. Now in the twilight of his life and running career, dad has become an inspiration not only to our family but to many people in the Baltimore area. His message is simple: "You're never too old to get up and start an exercise program."

I never did beat dad's record of 3:04:26, and at 63 it's unlikely I ever will. But that doesn't matter. These runs sponsored by the Baltimore Running Festival are pure gold. And our family knows, it's much more fun to run with dad than against him.