

The Marathon of Hope

September 1, 1980 – It was a dull day in Northern Ontario when Terry Fox ran his last miles.

He had started out strong that morning and felt confident. The road was lined with people shouting, “Don’t give up, you can make it!” words that spurred him and lifted his spirits. But after 18 miles he started coughing and felt a pain in his chest.

Terry knew how to cope with pain. He’d run through it as he always had before; he’d simply keep going until the pain went away.

For 3,339 miles, from St John’s, Newfoundland, Canada’s eastern most city on the shore of the Atlantic, he’d run through six provinces and now was two-thirds of the way home. He’d run close to a marathon a day, for 143 days. No mean achievement for an able-bodied runner, an extraordinary feat for an amputee.

Terry’s left leg was strong and muscular. His right was a mere stump fitted with an artificial limb made of fibreglass and steel. He’d lost the leg to cancer when he was 18.

He was 22 now; curly haired, good-looking, sunburned. He was strong, wilful and stubborn. His run, the Marathon of Hope, as he called it, a quixotic adventure across Canada that defied logic and common sense, was his way of repaying a debt.

Terry believed that he had won his fight against cancer, and he wanted to raise money, \$1 million perhaps, to fight the disease. There was a second, possibly more important purpose to his marathon; a man is not less because he has lost a leg, indeed, he may be more. Certainly, he showed there were no limits to what an amputee could do.

He changed people’s attitude towards the disabled, and he showed that while cancer had claimed his leg, his spirit was unbreakable. His Marathon of Hope had started as an improbable dream – two friends, one to drive the van, one to run, a ribbon of highway, and the sturdy belief that they could perform a miracle.

He ran through ice storms and summer heat, against bitter winds of such velocity he couldn’t move, through fishing villages and Canada’s biggest cities. Though he shunned the notion himself, people were calling him a hero. He still saw himself as simple little Terry Fox, from Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, average in everything but determination.

But here, 18 miles from Thunder Bay, at the head of Lake Superior, the coughing had stopped, but the dull, blunt pain had not. Neither running nor resting could make it go away. He saw the people lined up the hill ahead of him. The Ontario Provincial Police

cruiser was behind him, red lights flashing in the drizzle, and cheers still surrounded him: "You can make it all the way!"

Terry could not ignore what people said to him. He listened. "I started to think about those comments. I thought this might be my last mile." He ran until there were no more people, and then he climbed wearily into the van and asked his friend and driver Doug Alward to drive him to a hospital.

When Terry won a place on the junior varsity basketball team at Simon Fraser University in 1976, many were surprised. He was not a gifted player. Others were more talented, though few could match him for determination, toughness, and hard work.

It had always been that way. When he was in Grade 8, Terry was rated 19 on a team of 19 players and was on the court for only one minute that first season. That didn't deter him. Two years later he was a starting player. By the time he graduated from high school, he and his friend Doug were named athletes of the year.

Aches are common in an athlete's life, but at the end of his first year of university, there was a new, alarming pain in his knee. One morning he woke to find he couldn't stand. A week later, he learned this was no cartilage problem, as he had thought. He had a malignant tumor; his leg would be amputated in four days. His doctors told him bluntly, because of recent advances in research his chances of survival were 50 to 70 per cent. If he'd become sick two years earlier, his chances would have been 15 per cent.

The night before his operation, his high school basketball coach, Terri Fleming, brought him a running magazine which featured an article about an amputee, Dick Traum, who had run in the New York City Marathon. And though his future was never more precarious, Terry dreamed that night about running across Canada. "I'm competitive," Terry said. "I'm a dreamer. I like challenges. I don't give up. When I decided to do it, I knew I was going to go all out. There was no in-between."

The 16 months of follow-up treatment marked Terry irreversibly. He saw suffering as he'd never seen it before. He heard doctors telling youngsters in the nearby beds that they had a 15 per cent chance of living. He heard screams of pain. He saw strong, young bodies wasted by disease. He never forgot what he'd seen and when he left the cancer clinic for the last time, he left with a burden of responsibility. He was among the lucky one-third of patients who survived.

"I could not leave knowing these faces and feelings would still exist even though I would be set free from mine," he wrote in a letter asking for sponsorship for his run. "Somewhere, the hurting must stop... and I was determined to take myself to the limit for those causes.

It was Rick Hansen who invited Terry to get back into sports and join a wheelchair basketball team. (Rick and Terry were of the same mold; later Rick, a paraplegic, would push his wheelchair around the world, and he never failed to give credit to Terry, the

friend who inspired him.)

Terry tackled this new challenge with his usual gusto. He made himself strong pushing his wheelchair along the sea wall at Stanley Park in Vancouver. Or he'd find steep mountains and push himself up unruly logging roads. He pushed himself until his hands bled.

Two years after his operation, Terry started a running program. The first half miles he ran in the dark, so no one could see him. But one of his coaches from junior high, Bob McGill, who had since overcome cancer himself, heard the steady one-two thump of Terry's good leg and the thud of his artificial leg, long before he could see his wobbly frame in the darkness.

Terry trained for 15 months, running 3,159 miles, running until his stump was raw and bleeding, running every day for 101 days, until he could run 23 miles a day. He took one day off at Christmas, only because his mother asked him. Once, just before Christmas, when he had run only a half mile, the bottom half of his artificial leg snapped in two pieces, and Terry crashed to the pavement. He picked up the two parts, tucked them under his arm, stuck out his thumb and hitch-hiked home. There, he clamped the two parts together and ran another five miles.

When Terry told his mother Betty, he intended to run across Canada, in her nonsense way she told him he was crazy. He said he was going to run no matter what she thought. Then Betty told her husband Rolly, and he, knowing his son so well, simply said, "When?"

When Terry approached the Canadian Cancer Society about his run, its administrators were skeptical about his success. They doubted he could raise \$1 million and as a test of his sincerity, told him to earn some seed money and find some corporate sponsors. They believed they'd never hear from him again.

But Terry persevered, earning sponsors and the promise of promotion from the cancer society. On April 12, 1980, he dipped his artificial leg in the murky waters of St John's harbour and set off on the greatest adventure of his life.

"I loved it," Terry said. "I enjoyed myself so much and that was what other people couldn't realize. They thought I was going through a nightmare running all day long. "People thought I was going through hell. Maybe I was partly, but still I was doing what I wanted and a dream was coming true and that, above everything else, made it all worthwhile to me. Even though it was so difficult, there was not another thing in the world I would have rather been doing. "I got satisfaction out of doing things that were difficult. It was an incredible feeling. The pain was there, but the pain didn't matter. But that's all a lot of people could see; they couldn't see the good that I was getting out of it myself." And the people of Canada were latching on to Terry's dream. They wept as he ran by, fists clenched, eyes focussed on the road ahead, his awkward double-step and hop sounding down the highway, the set of his jaw, unflinching, without compromise.

The look of courage. As a woman in Toronto, Canada's largest city said, "He makes you believe in the human race again."

He'd start before dawn every morning, running in shorts and a T-shirt printed with a map of Canada. He wasn't ashamed of his disability. Children were curious about his artificial leg. How did it work? What happens when it breaks?

Donations poured in. Reading of Terry's goals, Four Seasons' President, Isadore Sharp, was also caught up in the dream of the Marathon of Hope. He pledged \$10,000 to the marathon and challenged 999 other Canadian corporations to do the same.

If \$1 million toward cancer research was within reach, why not \$1 from every Canadian; why not a goal of \$23 million? The money came in many ways. People waited for hours on the roadside to watch Terry pass. Sometimes a stranger would press a \$100 bill into his hand as he ran by.

One day in southern Ontario, they collected \$20,000 on the highway. A man in Hamilton sat in a vat of banana lemon custard and raised \$912 for the Marathon of Hope. In Gravenhurst, the heart of Ontario's cottage country, with a population of 8,000, they raised more than \$14,000. A musician, apparently without cash, handed Terry his \$500 guitar.

Throughout his run and even in the months before, Terry neglected his medical appointments. No one could force him to see a doctor for a check-up. He said he didn't believe the cancer would come back. Earlier, when he'd missed his appointments for x-rays at the cancer clinic in Vancouver he said, "Every time I went down, I was shivering and it wasn't because I was cold. I was afraid."

Doctors in Thunder Bay confirmed that cancer had spread from his legs to his lungs. He phoned his parents who caught the first plane to Thunder Bay. Terry was so weak when he tried to walk across the street to a car so they could get a bite to eat outside the hospital, he collapsed. "The day before I'd run 26 miles and now I couldn't even walk across the street," he said.

Betty wept; Rolly's mouth was taut and hard as Terry spoke to reporters: "Well, you know, I had primary cancer in my knee three and a half years ago, and now the cancer is in my lung and I have to go home." His voice broke as he spoke. He continued softly, "and have some more x-rays or maybe an operation that will involve opening up my chest or more drugs. I'll do everything I can. I'm gonna do my very best. I'll fight. I promise I won't give up."

His father, Rolly, was overheard to say, "I think it's unfair. Very unfair."

"I don't feel this is unfair," Terry told him. "That's the thing about cancer. I'm not the only one. It happens all the time, to other people. I'm not special. This just intensifies what I

did. It gives it more meaning. It'll inspire more people. I could have sat on my rear end, I could have forgotten what I'd seen in the hospital, but I didn't."

"How many people do something they really believe in? I just wish people would realize that anything's possible, if you try; dreams are made, if people try. When I started this run, I said that if we all gave one dollar, we'd have \$22 million for cancer research, and I don't care man, there's no reason that isn't possible. No reason. I'd like to see everybody go kind of wild, inspired with the fund-raising."

He came home in a private jet. This was not the triumphant homecoming he and so many others had imagined. The run didn't end with Terry dipping his artificial leg in the seawaters off Vancouver's Stanley Park; instead, he was taken by ambulance back to the Royal Columbian Hospital.

He continued to wear his Marathon of Hope T-shirt in hospital and refused the many offers, including one from the Toronto Maple Leaf hockey team, to finish his run for him.

In less than 48 hours the CTV television network arranged a special telethon and by the end had raised more than \$10 million – \$1 million from the provincial government of British Columbia, another \$1 million from the province of Ontario and substantial cheques from corporations. Most, however, came from private donations.

Isadore Sharp had sent a telegram which Terry pinned to his hospital bed. He said that Terry's marathon was just the beginning and that a fundraising run would be held in his name every year to continue his fight against cancer.

"You started it. We will not rest until your dream to find a cure for cancer is realized."

For the next 10 months, Terry battled the disease. Some days the pain was nightmarish; some days, he felt well enough to go out with Rick Hansen and his friends.

As he fought for his life, he was honoured with awards: He was the youngest Companion of the Order of Canada, the nation's top civilian honour; he was named Newsmaker of the Year by the Canadian Press; he won the Lou Marsh trophy for outstanding athletic achievement; his portrait was hung in the Sports Hall of Fame and letters of encouragement came from around the world; and, most importantly, donations to his Marathon of Hope reached \$23.4 million. The Guinness Book of Records named him top fundraiser. A mountain was named after him in British Columbia.

Terry died, his family beside him, June 28, 1981 – one month short of his twenty-third birthday.

There was nation-wide mourning. Flags were flown at half-mast. But people didn't forget him and his story didn't end with his death. The first Terry Fox Run was held that September – more than 300,000 people walked or ran or cycled in his memory and raised \$3.5 million.

Terry's mother Betty says there would be no Terry Fox Run if not for Isadore Sharp. And Mr Sharp, who has known the loss of a son to cancer, believes one day a brilliant young researcher, perhaps one funded by a Terry Fox grant, will find a cure for the disease.

"Terry did not lose his fight," Mr Sharp says. "Perhaps he finished all he had to do. Terry is like a meteor passing in the sky, one whose light travels beyond our view, yet still shines in the darkest night."