

Blind Runner Takes on Boston Marathon Challenge

Josh Crary '10 runs to inspire others, support charity

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Most runners competing in the Boston Marathon on Monday will check their progress by large mile marker signs posted along the legendary 26.2-mile route.

Josh Crary '10, a legally blind runner, won't be able to see a single one.

But Crary is not concerned. For one, he knows from talking to veteran marathoners that the best Boston memories will come as sounds, not sights. And for Crary, some of the most inspiring sounds will begin with the voices of his three sighted guides – all friends from UNH – running by his side, protecting him from road hazards, and encouraging him through sections that will test him to the core.

Finally, there will be those legendary landmarks of sound along the way.



WHEN JOSH CRARY WAS 14, HE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH THE DEGENERATIVE RETINAL CONDITION KNOWN AS CHOROIDEREMIA, WHICH CAUSES INCREASED BLINDNESS OVER TIME. NEVER ALLOWING HIS CONDITION TO HOLD HIM BACK FROM ACHIEVING HIS DREAMS, JOSH IS CURRENTLY TRAINING TO RUN THE 2012 BOSTON MARATHON.

“Runners talk about Boston all the time, but you really don’t know what to expect until you’re actually there,” says Crary, who is running Boston for the first time and raising money for charity. “I bet it’s going to be a powerful experience.”

Still, Crary better brace himself, and his ears.

About a mile away from the halfway point, Crary will begin to hear the famous “scream tunnel” at Wellesley College where, in a time-honored tradition, hundreds of students line the course, screaming at the tops of their lungs for hours on end. The din they put up is so loud that Crary may have a hard time hearing his guides through that stretch.

At the bottom of Heartbreak Hill, 50 drummers will gather at their tradition spot, and pound out thundering rhythms to carry the runners up and over the route’s most infamous climb.

And as Crary finally rounds the corner onto Boylston Street for the homestretch, he will be greeted by thousands of spectators. And you can bet dedicated marathon fans – an estimated 500,000 will line the race course on Monday – will erupt when they see the distinctive race number pinned on Crary’s shirt, identifying him as a blind runner.

Exciting? Absolutely. But also nerve-wracking as the big day approaches, the ultimate physical and mental endurance test that Crary started as a non-runner more than a year ago.

“I never imagined I would be this nervous about the marathon...I had no idea what I was getting myself into it,” Crary wrote in his blog, [Boston Blind Runner](#), last week.

The Long Road to Boston

Running 26 miles is challenge enough for anyone. But for the sight-impaired, the road is especially long.

Crary, a non-competitive athlete growing up, decided to run Boston to challenge himself, to inspire others, and to raise money for [AccessSportAmerica](#), which helps people with disabilities to participate in adaptive recreation and sports.

“I hope that as I journey to the 2012 Boston Marathon and this story is shared, that other people with disabilities feel moved to take on their fears with me,” Crary, who earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology and women’s studies at UNH, wrote in his blog. So far, he has raised nearly \$6,000 in pledges.

But his quest may have also begun when he was 14 years old, and his eyeglass prescription suddenly changed dramatically. Medical tests revealed the degenerative genetic disease choroideremia that left him legally blind by the end of high school.

“Denial, anger, confusion, depression, embracement, joy and purpose are all things I have felt because of this condition,” he wrote. “The earlier years were filled with long runs of hardship, sprinkled with glimpses of positivity.”

That began to change when Crary, who grew up in Center Barnstead, N.H., came to UNH and immersed himself in his studies and in college life, making new friends, serving as resident advisor, and learning guitar. A dean’s list student, he was also identified as a “[New Hampshire Superstar](#)” – one of a select group of students who were profiled in the UNH Report.

At UNH, he became close friends with Doug Trudel ’09, Gilly Barbato ’10, and Mike Horrigan ’09 – who will each run a leg of Monday’s marathon as Crary’s guides.

“There’s no way I could even begin to think about doing this without them,” Crary says. “Being a guide is a huge commitment, so for them to step up and help out really means a lot to me.”

For the past few years, Crary has worked at Berklee College of Music in Boston, as a diversity program adviser. He is also working toward a graduate degree in higher education and student affairs at Boston College, planning to graduate in May. His college and work experiences, he says, made him more confident and eager to challenge his own assumptions about his disability.

“Once you push through the obstacles you have placed on yourself, and perhaps others have placed on you, life is pretty damn beautiful,” Crary wrote about his decision to run Boston. “I hope other people feel something as they follow this journey and also go after what makes them feel beautiful. More importantly, free. We all deserve to feel this and should have the opportunity to feel this.”

Crary has been building his mileage the past year, usually running on a treadmill, with occasional forays outdoors with a training partner or solo on an oval running track, where he is able to stay on course. His longest training was 18 miles at about 8 minutes a mile – a strong pace for a first-time marathoner.

Although he's hoping to finish Boston in less than 4 hours, Crary says his first goal is simply to finish. And with just a few days to go, he's feeling confident and ready to go.

"Life happens," Crary wrote on his blog. "We are dealt a hand out of our control, but where can we go from there? Up! The Boston Blind Runner chooses to go up, no matter how intimidating the climb is."

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