

The Last Runner

The annual marathon in my town usually occurs during a heatwave. My job was to follow behind the runners in an ambulance in case any of them needed medical attention. The driver and I were in an air-conditioned ambulance behind approximately one hundred athletes waiting to hear the sharp crack of the starting gun.

"We're supposed to stay behind the last runner, so take it slowly," I said to the driver, Doug, as we began to creep forward.

"Let's just hope the last runner is fast!" he laughed.

As they began to pace themselves, the front runners started to disappear. It was then that my eyes were drawn to the woman in blue silk running shorts and a baggy white T-shirt.

"Doug, look!

We knew we were already watching our "last runner." Her feet were turned in, yet her left knee was turned out. Her legs were so crippled and bent that it seemed impossible for her to be able to walk, let alone run a marathon.

Doug and I watched in silence as she slowly moved forward.

We didn't say a thing. We would move forward a little bit, then stop and wait for her to gain some distance. Then we'd slowly move forward a little bit more.

As I watched her struggle to put one foot in front of the other, I found myself breathing for her and urging her forward. I wanted her to stop, and at the same time, I prayed that she wouldn't.

Finally, she was the only runner left in sight. Tears streamed down my face as I sat on the edge of my seat and watched with awe, amazement and even reverence as she pushed forward with sheer determination through the last miles.

When the finish line came into sight, trash lay everywhere and the cheering crowds had long gone home. Yet, standing straight and ever so proud waited a lone man. He was holding one end of a ribbon of crepe paper tied to a post. She slowly crossed through, leaving both ends of the paper fluttering behind her.

I do not know this woman's name, but that day she became a part of my life - a part I often depend on. For her, it wasn't about beating the other runners or winning a trophy, it was about finishing what she had set out to do, no matter what.

When I think things are too difficult or too time-consuming, I get those "I-just-can't-do-its," I think of the last runner.

Then I realize how easy the task before me really is.