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Beyond Limits

Almost three years ago, Steve Gaudet's physicians shook their heads in amazement that he was still alive, let alone finishing races. *Walk About* readers were first introduced to Gaudet, a life-long severe asthmatic, in our November/December 2006 issue, after his remarkable achievement of completing three half-marathons and his first full marathon despite irreversible damage to his lungs and a history of 82 hospitalizations.

Now, at 54 years old, Gaudet has continued to mystify medical professionals by completing an additional five half and five full marathons in the U.S. and Europe, and on April 20th 2009, he walked his way into the record books by becoming the first person with documented severe lung disease ever to cross the finish line at the Boston marathon.

Setting records was the last thing on Gaudet's mind five years ago when his flare-ups became so unpredictable and severe that he was forced to retire from a 30-year career as a respiratory therapist. Yet, he knew from working with patients that exercise was vital to his survival, and he became a walker by default (all other sports left him impossibly winded). Even today, Gaudet is never sure to what degree his body will cooperate. There are some mornings that he is so short of breath, he finds it difficult to walk around the block, yet there are others



when he can walk the hills of San Francisco with relative ease.

In the fall of 2006, Gaudet set his sights on walking the Portland Marathon, his first full race. Although plagued with severe leg cramps from about mile five, he pushed on, finishing the race in just under nine hours. Certain he was capable of a better showing, Gaudet modified his training regimen for the next five months, and was able to shave almost two hours off his time in the Eugene marathon. His six hour, 52 minute finish in April of 2007 remains his personal best.

Although Gaudet does not rely on oxygen during races, keeping an inhaler in his hand and a portable nebulizer available if needed is essential. In October 2007, during his second Portland race, he almost had to quit when he needed a dose of Albuterol at mile seven, only to discover that he'd lost the inhaler. Fortunately, he still had his cell phone and the number of his good friend, Anita, who raced off on her moped and persuaded a pharmacist to open his store

two hours early and sell her a substitute over-the-counter brand. Anita handed off the inhaler to a very short of breath and wheezing Gaudet at mile 15, saving the race for him. Unbeknownst to Gaudet at the time, this was this finish that would help qualify him for the 2009 Boston Marathon, the best race experience of his life so far.

Before Boston, however, there was the Rome, a marathon Gaudet was encouraged to enter by his friend, elite runner Hansi Rigney. Although he had never been to Italy, and didn't know the terrain or the language, Gaudet jumped on the opportunity to try something new, and began what turned out to be months of careful planning to make the trek.

"The biggest challenge," Gaudet says, "in addition to staying healthy, was logistics — making sure I had two nebulizer machines which would be compatible with the local electrical current, finding a close place to stay, and planning for all the contingencies. I had to be ultra-prepared in case I got sick

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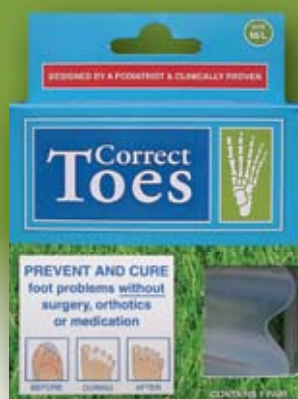


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and needed to be hospitalized."

Gaudet remains grateful, not only for being able to finish the race, but for meeting so many wonderful people from all over the world, many of whom have become dear friends. "Walking 26 miles through a 2,500 year-old city was incredible — Rome is awesome."

Since our first story, Gaudet has undergone 12 more increasingly critical hospital admissions bringing the total to 94. With that in mind, I asked him if his physicians agreed that the stress of training for and walking in races was a net positive.

"Some of my doctors think I overdo it,"



he admits. "My overall lung function has decreased by another twenty percent over the past two years (now with a baseline FEV1 of 35%), but that's just the normal progression of the disease." Gaudet is convinced that the decline would have been even worse if he were not physically active, but there are few statistics available on patients his age with similarly limited lung function, especially those with his ability to exercise as much as he does.

To qualify for the Boston Marathon's mobility impaired division, Gaudet's physicians had to make a compelling case on his behalf. Unlike most of the others

in the division who have obvious physical impairments, such as missing limbs or other muscular, joint or bone problems, Gaudet's disease is relatively invisible, although no less challenging.

"Mr. Gaudet is consistently breathing at his maximal expiratory flow rates," wrote physician, Dr. Joseph Galanter of UCSF, "... which places a substantial challenge on his ability to carry out even normal exertion, making his competition in distance events all the more remarkable."

Gaudet was thrilled to be selected as one of the 21 athletes to participate in the

division. "It was the experience of a lifetime. I have never felt so much support. We were the first off the line and there were people lined up two and three feet deep on both sides of the road high fiving us, wishing us well, for the entire length of the course — all 26.2 miles of it," Gaudet says, adding, "I have never felt such camaraderie among the runners. My walking partner, Mike, and I were treated like super stars by fellow runners and spectators alike. I was actually sore from hundreds of pats on the back. A good kind of sore."

These days, in addition to his training walks, Gaudet tries to make it to the gym twice a week to build upper body strength by working out with light weights and stretching. He'd love to be able to swim, but

his disease prohibits him from emptying his lungs enough to do more than float. This fall, Gaudet hopes to add more core training by incorporating Pilates. His goal is to be in the best shape possible for Boston next year.

As his doctor wrote in the close of his letter to the Boston Athletic Association, "I believe [Gaudet] can serve as a potent role model to millions of people with severe lung disease, and I hope you will offer him the opportunity to again surprise us with his perseverance." We couldn't agree more.

Read more about Steve Gaudet future events at www.breathinstephen.com. **WA**