

ASPETAR AT THE 2015 NEW YORK MARATHON

– *Written by Pieter d’Hooghe, Qatar.*

From a very young age I was always fascinated by stories from ancient history.

The Greek battle of Marathon was one of my favourites, especially since the legend is still linked to the modern Olympic marathon. The marathon story speaks to our imagination and I had always wondered at the back of my mind if I might one day be able to complete one. But obviously there’s a big difference between thinking about it and running it.

After some research, I settled on the famous New York Marathon and by applying for registration I forced myself to go for it, thinking: ‘If you can dream it, you can do it.’

However, beyond the fascination of the legend and the intensity of the physical challenge, lies the reality of the preparation, which is where my Aspetar marathon story starts.

THE LEGEND OF THE MARATHON

The name of the athletic long-distance endurance race, the ‘marathon’, comes from the legend of Pheidippides, a Greek soldier

and runner who was sent from the Greek town of Marathon to Athens, to announce that the heavily outnumbered Athenian army had defeated the Persians in the 490 BC Battle of Marathon. The legend started after he died while delivering the victory message.

THE MOTHER OF MARATHONS

At 5.30am on 1 November 2015, New York was preparing for the start of its annual ‘mother of all marathons’. At the National Library in the city centre, a few steps away from Times Square, hundreds of buses eagerly waited to deliver the runners to the start line in Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island.

The day before the race I collected my running number and race kit. My clothing was prepared for the early winter weather – in stark contrast to the desert conditions of Doha, where I had been training. It was a cold morning, but on arrival at the start area we received a bagel and some hot tea. People from 132 countries of all ages and races were joined together in an atmosphere of sporting brotherhood. It

is hard to put in to words how special it is to gather as like-minded participants and share this experience. One person runs to improve a previous time, one to honour the loss of a spouse or family member, one for a noble charity cause, another to tick a box off their bucket list. The marathon is clearly an exciting endurance run, but it is also a mental journey for many.

THE NEW YORK MARATHON IN NUMBERS

- 5 boroughs
- 26.2 miles
- 50,000+ runners
- 132 countries represented
- 300+ charities
- 10,000 volunteers
- 1 million spectators
- 4,770,984 overall miles travelled
- An endless number of stories.



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THE RACE

Four hours later, at 9.50am I was appointed to the first wave of runners and the cheerful volunteers guided us towards the start line. As we waited, a huge group of impaired, blind and handicapped runners passed by with their guides, amid immense cheers from the crowd. What a message these courageous people send to us all. I had goosebumps! I was reminded of a fitting quote by Robert Kennedy: “Some people look at things that happen and ask why? Other people look at things that did not yet happen and ask: why not?”

As the excitement built, I quickly forgot the cold. I forgot the many months and hours of focused training, the harshness of life as an athlete, training after work, preparing the right food, getting the right amount of sleep and the countless hours in the gym. But I will never forget the support of my family, who suffered along with me during those months.

The New York city mayor Bill de Blasio addressed the vast, colourful crowd with a short welcoming speech. A female runner came out from the crowd and performed a fantastic rendition of the United States national anthem. The Honorary Director of the organisation, Spike Lee, fired the starting shot, while Frank Sinatra’s ‘New York’ blared through the PA system:

‘If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere, it’s up to you New York’.

Four months of preparation in the summer heat of Doha, sometimes reaching 50°C had passed and the run had begun. Over

50,000 people started to get into the pace. The first mile is immediately uphill over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, then from Staten Island onto the second borough, Brooklyn. Then Queens and northwards from there. I felt my eyes and ears simply couldn’t take in everything that was happening around me. During a surreal moment while entering Queens, I passed singer/songwriter Alicia Keys and her crew (who are all also running) while her song ‘Empire State of Mind’ roared over the speakers:

*“These streets will make you feel brand new,
Big lights will inspire you,
Let’s hear it for New York”.*

The route was packed with spectators braving the cold to cheer on the runners, bands playing music, volunteers handing out water and people providing security and tracking the participants’ times.

Mile 16 is where 1st Avenue enters Manhattan. It looks like an endless hill. Some runners were tiring, but the crowd spurred them on. Coming back from the Bronx to 5th Avenue is simply mind-boggling. Thousands enthusiastically cheer you towards Mile 26.2 in Central Park, where victory and an emotional finish awaits. Crossing the finish line, I gratefully remembered a quote by Albert Camus:

*“La vraie générosité envers l’avenir,
Consiste à tout donner au présent”.*
*(“True generosity towards the future,
consists of giving all you have in the present”).*

With every step, I gratefully reflected on how amazing it is to work with my colleagues in Aspetar.

I recognised Craig Tanner, Athol Thomson and Ken van Alsenoy from the Podiatry Department who gave me great assistance for the right orthotics (no blisters!). The tireless efforts of the Physiotherapy Department that saved me 3 weeks prior to the run when my lateral hamstrings became knotted. The professional advice from Nathan Riding and Karim Khan regarding my hydration plan during the run and Rita Mansour for her valuable nutritional advice. We all work together towards Aspetar’s mission and vision, and I am proud to be part of a team of excellent individuals who I personally see delivering outstanding care to patients on a daily basis.

RUNNING IS LIFE

I have had the privilege of attending many mass sports gatherings in my life, but never have I experienced an event of that size that ran so smoothly, with such a welcoming atmosphere.

From the volunteers, through to the official staff and police officers keeping everyone safe, the overall experience was welcoming and professional.

When an event is so well prepared, with such attention to detail – the online information and registration, charity projects, training guidance, run experience and safety measures – you know it will be top class.

Thanks to all my colleagues at Aspetar for their excellence and guidance. Thanks to New York for a simply great event. A special thanks to my family and close friends for their tireless support.

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