A New York Marathon Update from COPD Athlete Russell

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

A Marathon for Change

With my departure to New York just about upon me it's made me look back and reflect on the progress I've made since May on and off the training track. There's no better stage than the New York marathon to bring COPD and other lung diseases into focus!

A Tired Body

It's fair to say the body and the mind are a little tired. I've run over 700 kms so far in training, with another 200 to go before race day. My legs are tired, but the harder battle is being mentally prepared to hit the road for the last group of long runs, which culminate in a 35km run four weeks before race day.

For the last 10 weeks I've had a weekly appointment with my physiotherapist to help keep my legs injury free, and to help with muscle soreness that goes with the workload that my legs have had to endure.

Unfortunately the physiotherapist can’t help my tired mind — that's something only I can do. But it has been made easier by the messages of support I’ve received from fellow patients from around the world. There is not a training session that goes by that I don't think about the positive thoughts that have been sent my way, and that goes a long way to keeping me motivated.

Running Like the Wind

When my coach and I sat down to figure out what would be the most effective training program for me to achieve my goal of finishing the New York marathon in under six hours, we knew it would be new territory. I have yet to meet a stage IV COPD patient who has run a marathon, let alone run it in under six hours.

At this stage I still have some work to do, but the signs from my training and lead up races are very encouraging. Each race has been a personal best and my recovery after the races has been very quick. In my last lead up race, I had aimed to finish the quarter marathon distance in two hours 45 mins. Finishing in two hours and 42 mins certainly brought a smile to my face.

Going from Ironman training, which was mainly low heart rate and long training sessions to a training regime that involves shorter sessions with high heart rate has been a challenge, especially with my COPD. However, the change has me running stronger and faster than I had ever imagined.

From a day-to-day perspective my increased fitness levels are having an impact on the simple things in life. Daily household chores have become easier because my breathing is less labored and my energy levels have increased. I also seem to be coping with the spring pollens better than I have done in the past, which could be because a lot of my running is in the early morning when pollen is more prevalent.

Learning Along the Way

An important aspect of what my coach and I are trying to achieve is how we can apply what we are learning along the way to other COPD patients. The New York marathon is really secondary to what I'm hoping to accomplish. If we can apply some of our training techniques to people with respiratory disease and give them a better quality of life as a result, that would be the real success story.

Learning to listen to how my body reacts to each training session has been a primary focus for me, as it allows both Coach Doug and I to make changes if needed. How my respiratory system reacts to high and low heart rate sessions, whether up hills or on flat ground, is amazing. I'm now running in high heart rate zones that I never thought possible and I'm doing it without my oxygen levels plummeting.

Getting to know your body is so crucial in dealing with COPD, as it allows you to know your limitations as well as enabling you to better inform your respiratory specialist on how you're feeling. When I started training for the New York marathon I thought I knew all there was to know about how my body performs with exercise — how wrong I was.

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Raising Awareness

Filming a documentary about this journey and how exercise can give people with respiratory disease a better quality of life has been demanding. For me, this is a great opportunity to shine a light on lung disease, as many of these diseases are not well known. Indeed, I hadn't heard of COPD until I was diagnosed with it.

So far there's been much interest in our little project from all around the world, which has put a smile on my face. With interest from TV and print media from around the world, my New York marathon run is shaping up to be a success in terms of raising awareness.

My inspiring British mate Vanessa Smith has just completed her first half marathon in the Great North Run. Vanessa used supplementary oxygen for her race, which certainly caught the attention of many. With media already talking about Vanessa and her achievements, now it's up to me to take the baton and continue the good work.

For those of you interested in following my progress, we plan to have live tracking on my Facebook page. If our technical skills are up to it the feed will show my position, pace, distance run and heart rate.

Support Network

Of course this couldn't happen without the tremendous support of family and friends as well as some great sponsors. The American Lung Association of the North East, Dr Noah Greenspan's Pulmonary Wellness & Rehabilitation Center, and the National Asthma Council of Australia (NACA) have all been invaluable in their support.

Coming from Australia to run a marathon in New York has many challenges, but having people to help me in both places has been great. My New York friends have given me valuable tips about the conditions I will face as well as the logistics of getting around New York.

Dr Greenspan, who has many years experience in pulmonary rehabilitation, has given Coach Doug and I some great insights, some of which we have applied to our training program.

In Australia, NACA have helped with fundraising and our race clothing. They've also been great supporters in helping raise awareness for COPD and Asthma.

Last but not least, NewLifeOutlook has given me a forum to not only raise awareness, but share my experiences and hopefully make a difference in someone’s life.

One Request

On November 1, whether you are taking interest in my race or not, I ask one favour: if you have COPD, make it a day you make a positive change in your life.