

a grateful heart

After 26 Boston Marathons, heart surgery almost kept Mark Buciak from running a 27th. Almost.

by mark buciak

My running career began on August 25, 1974, at my first day of cross-country practice at Gordon Tech High School. Since then, I have run hundreds of races and (prior to April 17) 49 marathons, including the last 26 consecutive Boston Marathons. There have been many challenges along the way, but nothing like what I faced this year.

For at least the last ten years, I have had an annual physical. I looked forward to it each year. I would schedule it in the morning, have lunch with friends at Pizzeria UNO, and then give thanks to God for a healthy body by donating a pint of blood.

Nadim Khoury, M.D., my internist for over 20 years, would always include an electrocardiogram (EKG) as part of my physical exam due to my family history of heart disease. Three years ago, the EKG diagnosed that I had an irregular heartbeat known as Atrial Fibrillation (or A-Fib). A test known as an echocardiogram told me some rough news: I had a leaky aortic heart valve.

In 2002, the leak I had was above average, but not critical. I could continue to run as long as I continued to have a semi-annual

EKG and heart echo. In November, the situation escalated. The leak had increased to the critical stage; it was time for surgery.

At first I could not believe that a 45-year-old marathon runner could have problems like this. After all, I had ran 49 marathons and over 110,000 miles. This defect had nothing to do with my lifestyle—I exercised on a regular basis and maintained a healthy diet. Plus, I felt no pain whatsoever. The doctors told me that I was born with a bad heart valve. Fortunately, they discovered it before it was too late.

I am grateful that I was able to enlist Patrick McCarthy, M.D., head of the Cardiothoracic Department of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, one of the most respected and famous cardiothoracic surgeons in the country. My valve was badly damaged and needed to be replaced, he said. We didn't need to do it immediately, but he strongly suggested that I schedule the surgery within the next two to three months.

I asked if we could wait until April 19. He asked me why, and so I told him my plan: I wanted to complete my 27th straight Boston Marathon on April 17, fly back to Chicago on April 18 and have surgery April 19. My heart wasn't ready for three months of hard training followed by one of toughest marathons in the world, he said. The solution? We scheduled the surgery to take place two weeks later, on Feb. 1. I hoped that I would be able to recover quickly enough to head to Boston in April.

There were several different kinds of valves to choose from. I requested the "super charged" model so that I could beat the Kenyans. Although Dr. McCarthy could not guarantee that, he was going to fix the leak. At that point, he estimated that my heart was operating at about 80 percent of its normal capacity.

On Feb. 1, 2006, I had open-heart surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital to replace a leaky heart valve. The day before checking into the hospital I ran 10 miles at 8 minutes per mile with absolutely no pain.

Surgery was about six hours long. I was totally asleep. Waking up and trying to take my first step not as easy. Getting out of bed for the first time after surgery and merely taking one step was probably the most difficult physical thing I have ever done in my life.

Two days after surgery, tests confirmed that the leak was fixed. Three days after the surgery, to show my appreciation to Dr. McCarthy and his team, I ordered pizza from Piece for all the



Mark Buciak and his wife, Barrie, at the 24.5 mile mark at the Boston Marathon. Barrie accompanied Mark on the last stretch of the race. *Photo by Arthur Clingris*

nurses on the cardiac floor. Returning home was my time to rest and recover. It was difficult to walk, and going up stairs seemed like climbing a mountain. I failed three stress tests in follow-up appointments. Each time, my heart shifted into ventricular tachycardia—another serious heart condition. In late March, I had to have a cardioversion procedure where they shocked my heart back into a normal rhythm.

My cardiologist, Pablo Denes, M.D., expressly instructed me not to run nor walk the Boston Marathon this year. I merely wanted to start the race (as I had done for the past 26 years). This year, I would be walking, not running, and would have to put the rest in God's hands.

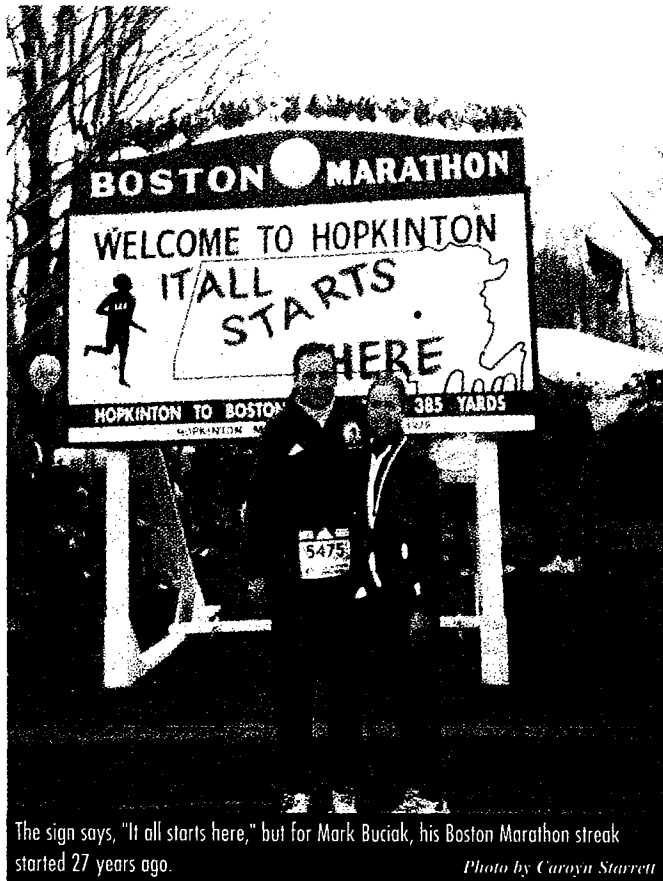
Against my cardiologist's instruction, I started the marathon. I began extremely slowly, not knowing what was in store for me. This was going to be like none of my previous marathons. I had no idea of what my body and my heart were capable of. This was completely uncharted territory for me, and I had nothing in reserve to reach for when the going got tough. In fact, I promised myself that I would stop instantly and sit on the curb (or seek the assistance of one of the many qualified medical personnel on the course) if my heart rate reached 130 beats per minute. As always, my first goal was to be on the starting line. The second goal was just to make it to the 1-mile mark.

My heart rate remained under 120 beats per minute for the first 13 miles, according to the Timex heart monitor I wore for safety. I was 2:43:23 at the halfway point, but now the uphill were in front of me. The second half of the course, my heart rate was in the 120s, which was the high end of the acceptable range but did not reach 130 even with my "kick" for the last .2 miles.

At Boston the finish line closes at 6:30. After 6:30 you are not an official finisher and are not recorded. I can thankfully report that I completed the course in 5:42:31.

This year, I can say I truly conquered Heartbreak Hill in more ways than one. My time was a PS (Personal Slowest), although it certainly was not a PW (Personal Worst). I did not run a PF (Personal Fastest), but I definitely consider this marathon my PB (Personal Best). It is all in how you view the entire situation.

While completing this course at such a slow pace, I was able



The sign says, "It all starts here," but for Mark Buciak, his Boston Marathon streak started 27 years ago.

Photo by Carolyn Starrett

to appreciate and see more than all my previous 26 Boston Marathons combined. I think that says something about slowing down one's life.

Upon returning to Chicago, I saw Dr. Denes for a check up. He said, "I told you not to do Boston this year. You are crazy. Heart patients who just had surgery should not do such an activity." My actions were dangerous and unsafe, and other heart patients should not attempt such an activity, he said. Then he added: "Well, at least you wore a heart monitor. Oh, congratulations that you finished the marathon!"

The last six months have been an experience that I never dreamed would happen to me. The lessons learned: have an annual physical (including an EKG), know your family medical history, and have faith in God.

I am extremely grateful to God, my doctors, nurses, family and friends for their wonderful support. Special thanks to my walking partners Veronica and Tom. Our walks and talks really were so important. Most importantly, I would like to express my sincere thanks for the concern, support, encouragement and prayers of my fellow runners. I could have never done it without you.

This has been a journey that I will not soon forget, nor that I ever want to repeat again.

Editor's Note: Mark dedicated this marathon to his grade school friend Danny Lynch who lost his battle with cancer this January.

Mark Buciak is a veteran of 50 marathons with a PR of 2:30:25. He is available as a personal running coach and motivational speaker. Mark can be reached at (773) 307-0033.



After 27 Bostons, Mark knows the best place to celebrate the marathon is the Bova Bakery in the North End. It is open 24/7 year-round at Prince and Salem streets.

Photo by Anne Lynch