

YEARS LATER, BEARDSLEY STILL AN INSPIRATION

By DON SIKORSKI
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Most people would say that the first “Rocky” movie was the best of the bunch. Yet not everyone would recall that Rocky Balboa, played by Sylvester Stallone in the 1976 Oscar winning classic, actually lost that championship fight with Apollo Creed in the movie’s conclusion. That’s because the storyline of the unknown underdog going the distance with the best in the world is inspiring in itself. Flash forward six years to April 19th, 1982 to Hopkinton, Massachusetts, where two men would stage an epic battle ever-so similar to fictional Creed-Balboa fight. Later dubbed “The Dual in the Sun” because of the 80+ degree temperatures that would greet the marathoners in Boston that year, world record holder Alberto Salazar was about to tangle with a tough Minnesota farm boy who, like Balboa, was prepared to dish out all the champ could handle.

Except for the multitude of 100+ mile weeks of training each had endured in preparation for their 1982 Boston Marathon battle, the two men doing battle couldn’t have been more different. The Cuban-born Salazar already owned the best marathon time in the world by virtue of his 2:08:13 clocking in New York City the previous fall, and he had never lost a marathon race. Bold and brash, Salazar possessed impressive running credentials dating back to his Oregon days. He predicted he would win, that he would set a world record, and that no one in the field was capable of running with him over the 26.2 mile distance. Dick Beardsley, a native of Wayzata, Minnesota (population 4,000), was inspired by these comments. Although Beardsley’s high school credentials were mediocre at best and his debut marathon time of 2:47 was clearly not of elite status, he has progressed quickly at the marathon distance, and the previous June had clocked a 2:09:37 course record at the 1981 Grandma’s Marathon in Minnesota. Beardsley was a disciplined individual who relished the hard work. He would rise at 3:30am to train twice daily, logging upwards of 140 miles per week and battling the bitter Minnesota winters before tackling his daily farm chores. Yet despite his improved credentials, Beardsley was dismissed as little more than a top 10 threat in Boston. But mile after mile, as the big name contenders dropped one by one, it was Dick Beardsley that led the race at the top of Heartbreak Hill with Salazar a mere step behind. Over the final miles, Beardsley and Salazar went toe to toe; exchanging surges and fending off the effects of the sapping heat. When it was all over, Salazar had hung on for the victory in a course and American record 2:08:52, with Beardsley a mere two second behind. It was the closest finish ever in the race’s 86 year history. And much like Rocky Balboa, Dick Beardsley had earned the respect of the champ and had proved something both to himself and to the world in a battle that would forever be remembered in running folklore. Neither runner would ever again run the Boston Marathon, nor would neither individual ever run that fast again.

Today, the 49 year-old Beardsley continues to be an inspiration. His battles later in life have made that Boston battle with Alberto pale in comparison. Consider that in November 1989, a near-fatal tractor accident mangled his leg. He would subsequently learn that his insurance would not cover the accident. His neck and back had been badly damaged after being hit by a car while on a training run. And he had become addicted to painkillers, the result of recovery from numerous surgeries. Finally, Dick Beardsley’s life had hit rock bottom when on October 1st, 1996, he was arrested for forging prescriptions for pain killers. Beardsley had been accumulating over 1,500 pills in a single month. Doctors were shocked that the medicines didn’t kill him. It was the years of training, along with the support of his family, which kept Dick Beardsley alive. He claims that his subsequent recovery from these addictions were more painful than any marathon he has ever run. “If I had a chance, I would have sawed my arms and legs off because they hurt so badly,” recalls Beardsley of his body’s response to ridding itself of painkillers.

Beardsley credits his family and his running friends for getting him through those tough times. Upon his 50th birthday next March, he will have been drug free for nine years. His book, “Staying the Course: A Runner’s Toughest Race”, is much more than a training manual for inspiring marathoners. It tells the story not only of that famous “Dual in the Sun” but also of Dick Beardsley’s greatest life battles and how he has won. Listening to Dick Beardsley speak during the weekend of the Mystic Places Marathon, I couldn’t help be impressed with the man. Here was someone who was an elite athlete, yet he immediately struck me as one of the nicest people you would ever want to meet. He was engaging and entertaining, and while his description of the epic Boston battle with Salazar was motivating, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place when Beardsley began to describe the obstacles he faced subsequent to his competitive running career. I was also impressed by the fact that he never made excuses or blamed anyone else for his struggles, not the motorcycle cop who blocked his path in the final quarter mile of the battle with Alberto or the doctor’s who prescribed pain killers to him or the Soccer Mom driving the automobile that side swiped him during a training run.

Dick Beardsley should be the blueprint for every “no-talent” athlete out there who aspires to be the best they can be. His time from that 1982 Boston Marathon race remains the 4th fastest marathon ever run by an American. In addition to his motivational speaking career, he continues to run road races marathons and train up to 90 miles weekly. It’s amazing that he can even run at all. Despite the tremendous beating that his body has taken over the years, he would like to take a crack at running under 2:40 next year at the age of 50. And based on how he has bounced back from everything he has been through in his life, I have no doubts that Dick Beardsley will succeed.

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