

# Up and Down and Up at the NYC Marathon

For the first time in its 43-year history, the New York City Marathon was canceled.

Each year the marathon is the biggest thing to hit the city. This year something much, much bigger hit—Hurricane Sandy. A storm as big as the state of Texas mauled the greater metro area like never before. It caused devastation so great that it was too much to comprehend at first.

In the United States, Sandy affected at least 24 states from Florida to Maine. It was felt as far west as Michigan and Wisconsin. Its storm surge hit New York City on October 29, flooding streets, tunnels, and subways. Downed power lines caused a six-alarm fire that scorched through Breezy Point in Queens. Because of the flooding, the NYC Fire Department couldn't reach the remote area. The result was a loss of 111 homes, with 20 more damaged.

My wife, Robin, is a surgical nurse at NYU Langone Medical Center. She spent 30 straight hours at the institution. The waves came over the retaining walls of the East River at 34th Street and flooded the basement of the building. A backup generator failed, prompting the evacuation of hundreds of patients.



The now-famous pictures show nurses carrying premature babies down 10 flights of stairs, “bagging” them all the way. “Bagging” is the term for helping the babies breathe with a hand-held manual respirator.

With all this going on, could the marathon possibly be held in just a few days?

The mayor's office, in conjunction with the police department and the New York Road Runners Club, said it would. Nearly 50,000 runners from around the world, 2 million fans lining the streets, and an additional 330 million television viewers would not be disappointed. Eight thousand people running for different charities would get their chance to raise an expected \$35 million. All the businesses, including hotels, restaurants, and bars, would be able to start recouping lost revenue through the city's single largest moneymaking event of the year. And everyone who trained so hard, many for their first marathon, would get their chance to experience the world's greatest race.

After 9/11, the marathon had taken on new significance. A marathon is a test of human perseverance. In 2001, with the World Trade Center no longer on

the Manhattan skyline, we lined up at the Verrazano Bridge. It was a symbol of a city's perseverance, refusing to give in, saying that you can hurt us but you can't stop us. Now we would show Hurricane Sandy the same mettle.

Robin and I were at the Javits Center late Friday afternoon. As we went through the expo, we started to notice cell phones coming out. Everyone around us began looking at their phones. Jaws started to drop. The whispers started. Rumors spread—it seems the marathon might not be run after all.

We returned home and turned on the TV. There was New York Road Runners Club CEO Mary Wittenberg looking as if she had lost 10 pounds and hadn't slept in days. It was decided that running the race would not be in the best interests of the city. At 5:21 eastern time, the 2012 ING New York City Marathon was officially canceled.

Hurricane victims wanted any resources used to present the race used for the relief effort instead. Especially, they wanted the police manpower to protect them from looters and to keep order in ever-growing gas lines. Those without power wanted any generators available. Who could blame them?

Unfortunately, though, the marathon had become a lightning rod of criticism. Runners were labeled a "selfish" group by the tabloid press. On one local television news broadcast, people were lambasting plans to hold the race. Ironically, the next segment congratulated the Brooklyn Nets on their home opener in the new, state-of-the-art Barclays Center. It showed a capacity



crowd drinking bottled water and beer. Likewise, the Giants were said to be helping the area get back to normal with their game on marathon Sunday.

### Marathon morning

A fellow marathoner called and wanted us to join him in running as much of a marathon in the park as we liked. Hurricane Sandy had stolen the marathon the way the Grinch stole Christmas. A run with friends would be good for us.

We made our way to the park in perfect cool, crisp, sunny weather. As we approached the park, we were amazed by what we saw. Runners from all over the world had the same idea. Hundreds of runners were running in two directions, some south, some north—all on the right side of the road. We joined in. As we ran to meet our friend, more and more runners showed up, most wearing their countries' colors, many wearing this year's NYC Marathon shirt and race numbers.

As we ran, more and more runners joined in. Hundreds became thousands and then many thousands. At first there was mostly silence, but then the noise came. *It started in low. Then it started to grow . . . but the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry! It couldn't be so. But it was merry! Very!*

As the oncoming runners cheered for whatever country was coming at them, we cheered back. More and more fans appeared on the roads. Groups of Germans were slapping French runners five. Australians were cheering on Argentineans. Norwegians and Swedes were exchanging cheers with Japanese and Chinese.

Soon we began to see makeshift water stops. At a Fifth Avenue entrance, we saw children with their Halloween bags out giving their candy to runners!

Farther along, we saw blind Polish runners with their arms extended. They were seeking guides so they could be part of the experience. Strangers took their arms and led them on their way. I had a chance to speak with Gerle Shagdar, who serves as the Achilles International chapter coordinator. Gerle told me that she had handicapped athletes from New Zealand who had spent 42 hours trying to get to New York. Others from South Africa were staying in hotels with only backup generators for minimal power. They were handed glow sticks to help get around their hotel. Many of her people had stayed at airports for days trying to get in.

At the Achilles “Welcome Party” on Friday night, they learned of the cancellation. “One person started to cry,” said Gerle. “Then we all started.” But the tears didn’t last long, it seems. For all their hardships of travel, lost training, and lost money, they realized the circumstances—something bigger and much more terrible had happened to others here in NYC.

New Zealand runners said they were looking for ways to help. They found a church on Fifth Avenue that would accept clothing for the relief effort. The New Zealanders made their donations and spread the word.

As we ran, we found out that that wasn’t the only giving. The NYRRC donated \$1 million to relief, with an additional \$1.6 million coming from runners. The NYRRC also donated the marathon water, foils, food, and ponchos. We also learned that an army of other runners descended on the Staten Island Ferry that morning. They chose to run around Staten Island giving out supplies that they carried in their NYC Marathon sacks.

Running next to an Australian named Malcolm Anson, I asked him how he felt about the cancellation. He said that at first he was angry, but seeing pictures of the carnage put it all in perspective. “We feel terrible for all those people. We’ll come back next year.”

Gerle told me that many of her group said the day gave them great joy. “Some said it was the best marathon in their life.”

Back in Central Park, South African runners began singing “Shosholoza,” a song they told me means “keep on moving forward—no matter what.”

*“And then every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! Sandy hadn’t stopped the marathon from running. IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!”*

**—Jeff Knapp**