

# Running From the Dark

The amazing recovery of Richard Dodd.

BY PAUL C. MAURER

Richard Dodd stood at the edge of the icy river ready to end his life. The jump wouldn't be far, no more than 10 feet; surely the fall itself wouldn't kill him. It was clear the unforgiving river would perform the task in a numbing and seamless fashion. He grasped the wrought-iron railing with gloveless hands until the frozen metal burned his palms. He gripped harder and his knuckles blanched, but he scarcely noticed the discoloration. His mind swirled as a whirlwind of images and thoughts flashed. What if he had never been born? Would it really have mattered? Even worse, if he jumped would anyone even know he was gone? Would the world care that one more hopeless drunk had flung himself in the icy flow and ended his godforsaken life? He closed his eyes as the winter winds whipped and thought of his family: the weaving love and hate of an alcoholic father that formed his future, a mother who endured years of strain holding a family together but who forgot the simple acts forming the soul of a young boy, an older brother living in a group home after a singular tragedy left him a remnant of the man he used to be. He thought of runners who valued his coaching and trusted the words spurring them to run better than they had ever thought possible. He gripped the railing harder and rocked back and forth in a silence that had become deafening.

And he made a choice, a choice to not quit in the hardest race of his life, a race harder than the countless competitions where sweat and blood were left on the pavement. He let go of the iron railing and for the first time in his life, a step backward marked the beginning of a new race—a race toward his own salvation.

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The moments before a marathon were the worst. That was the time self-doubt crept in like smoke filtering from a disregarded fire. He stood on the starting line and hid himself within the pack of runners as if he could disappear. He took a series of deep breaths, shaking his arms to wash away the anxiety coursing through his system. He had been on the starting line so many times before that he could only estimate the number. *Five hundred? A thousand?* Yet the feeling was always the same, a jangled sensation of excitement and nervousness pulsing through his body as if he was standing barefoot on an electrical wire. But this time it was worse.

He took a deeper breath to clear his head. Blowing out a thin stream of air, he closed his eyes and thought of the path to this very moment. His person had taken many forms in five decades of life: son, brother, college student, husband, coach, and runner. Yet smothering them all was his most recent occupation: he was a recovering stone-cold drunk. He opened his eyes at the painful reality and accepted it for what it was—the unvarnished and unavoidable truth. He rolled his neck and recounted the many places he had lived in adulthood: a series of comfortable suburban homes, jail, friends' couches, and, most embarrassingly, the Milwaukee Rescue Mission. The journey was one he could never have envisioned nor would ever wish on anyone. But it had happened, and there was no erasing the unpleasant facts.

From a distance the race announcer blared.

“Three minutes until the start!” she called.

*Three minutes*, he thought. *More than enough time to beg out of the race and fabricate another excuse.* But what would that be? Tight calf? Stomach problems? Or maybe just walk away and return to a past that left him alone and forgotten? To a barstool that would offer a glimmer of hope only to snatch it away the moment his wallet emptied? *No*, he thought. *This time I stay.*

As was nervous habit, he fingered the race number pinned to his chest. He looked through the crowd for a familiar face and nodded to the few he recognized. He was sheepish because some of these men had accomplished more in life than he ever would. There were doctors and lawyers and professionals of all sizes and shapes. But with one last deep and cleansing breath, he blew away the negativity as fast as it came. On the starting line, accomplishments didn't matter, and perhaps that was why he had taken to running decades ago. With running it was not where you came from or how big your bank account was. What mattered was the simple fact that it was a contest of traveling a distance in a time as fast as possible. Aside from the thin sole of rubber protecting the feet of each competitor, there were no frills or technology involved. It was *mano a mano*, a simple battle of will and conditioning that never depended on luck or bluster.

Now, in a matter of seconds, he finally had somewhere to run and nowhere to hide. The starting gun freed him from his thoughts. He shuffled forward, a molecule in the greater amoeba of runners. There would be no running with the lead pack, as those days were in the rear-view mirror. He was content to let the pack carry him the first few miles and save his energy for later. The excitement of the moment created a buzzing noise only the runners could hear. The small cackle of energy lighting the runners from the inside was a dangerous creature. He had seen a thousand runners succumb to its deliciousness and take off faster than their bodies could sustain. It was an adrenaline-fueled bolus of false promise that sent newbies to their knees far before the finish line. With experience as a guide, he resisted the temptation to get caught up in the moment. One step at a time.

Surrounded by other runners, he still ran as if alone. He monitored each segment of his body as if he was a mechanic listening under the hood: feet, shins, and quads; so far, so good. He shook out his arms to let the residual tension recede and settled into the long haul. To him, running was as natural as breathing and he could scarcely remember a time he didn't run. Part of him wondered if that time even existed.

The first few miles were tucked into the scenery of the Wisconsin suburb of Grafton. He had run the Lakefront Marathon before, more times than he could count. His best was an effortless day in 1983 when he ran the race in 2 hours, 19 minutes, and change. On that day the running gods looked down from above and gave him a special blessing. He experienced the same lightness three years later in a second-place finish in the very same race. Today's effort, although slower, offered the same sensation of operating on smooth rails greased to allow maximum glide. He knew the feeling wouldn't last, but for the moment he was grateful and settled into a steady rhythm.

The cornfields flew by and his thoughts drifted, first toward the present and how he had inched forward to recover a sense of self. And then toward the past where he had eventually lost his way.

He remembered a time when life began to change, a time when he and his friends played in the mountains of new dirt surrounding his boyhood terrain, the moment he first began to question his home life. At first he never thought much about his father's drinking. As a young boy, the abnormal became the norm. His father had gone through a half-dozen unsuccessful stays in rehabilitation for alcoholism. On one of those occasions his father was drinking within a matter of hours after returning home. His mother called his father's place of work claiming the "flu" in order to save his job. For the boy, a kernel of family dysfunction took root in his psyche that would play out in time.

Time. It was always about time.

By the five-mile mark, the excitement of the beginning of the race had vanished. He completed the distance in under 34 minutes, and it felt easy. He accepted that he couldn't maintain the pace, but he always started races quicker than most. He liked to push the tempo and knew his body well enough to not blow up on the course like many others. Still, with over 20 miles to go, he consciously slowed the metronome in his legs. He had already edged past the runners who were his primary age-group competition in the 50-59 division. Competition was a strange thing at this age. The medal awarded held little intrinsic value anymore, and he had no interest in it. But the competitive juices still flowed, and no matter how small the race he wanted to conquer his opponent. He had always been competitive, and neither wrinkles nor scattered aches and pains eliminated that element. In his mind he was still flying along at a five-minute clip like all those years ago.

Like most runners, he imagined himself the lean warrior that pounded the streets in the glory days of youth. But as the seconds ticked, the clock didn't lie.

Concordia University appeared, and after throwing an empty water cup to the roadside, he shook out his arms one more time. He thought of his wasted years and a song lyric replayed: *Mile upon mile I got no direction, we're all playing the same game, we're all looking for redemption, just afraid to say the name.*

Over his formative years the parental arguments, drunken car accidents, and familial and financial instability become accepted as a simple fact of life. His sense of normalcy became skewed and he learned to live within the shadows of the turmoil caused by his father's alcoholism. Yet the boy did as any young child would; he continued to love and respect flawed parents without reservation.

His memory burned hot, and he consciously returned to the race at hand. He wanted to run strong but stay in control. To him, distance running had always been a balance in restraint and aggressiveness. Restraint was in the form of carefully parceling out energy so he could complete the entire distance. But aggressiveness was lurking beneath a calm exterior when a tactical move was considered or countered. Nonrunners observing a race see only the obvious, various sizes and shapes of humans propelling themselves forward stride after stride to complete a dubious achievement. No sense is made of the accomplishment and no words will convince them of its worth. Even runners newer to the game ask: *Why I am doing this? What is the point of it all?* Stopping is the obvious option, and there is a percentage that accepts the simple exit. Veteran runners do not. They know and embrace the internal battle being fought with every breath, the questions and doubts creeping through cracks in confidence improperly sealed even after years of training. Only a few achieve the impenetrable self-assurance the mandatory early-morning treks and frozen journeys eventually provide.

Today he won't stop. Even in grade school he didn't stop. Gym class often entailed running around the school where he outdistanced classmates. In the fifth grade he surprised himself by placing second in a 600-yard run against the best athletes in the school. To him, this was the first sign that the farther he ran, the better he performed. That simple achievement was scarcely noticed amid the confusion of home life.

Today he had no visions of a grandiose victory. Those days had long since passed, hidden behind the years, mistakes, and endless beer that soaked his soul. He once had a chance at greater glories, but that era had been wasted on frivolous times and unfocused goals.

Today he ran because of a call from an unnamed place.

The miles were still easy and he set himself on autopilot. A comfortable rhythm was entered and his aggressiveness button was muted. Competitors faded into the forefront or disappeared behind, but the end result was far from certain. The crowd was sparse and the occasional well-wisher offered only vague and nondescript

platitudes. *Lookin' good, buddy!* they told him. *Keep it up, you're almost there!* They meant well but the inane encouragement was greeted with a glance that was as much common courtesy as a dismissal of their good intentions. He had been in this position so many times that he felt like a greased robot sweating and gobbling yards stride after stride. Right now the effort was controlled, and he fought the urge to increase the pace. *Relax*, he told himself. *It's too early.*

He was right. The race was still in its infancy and hadn't even hit the hour mark. He was light on his feet and pleased that at 52 years old, his abused body was still able to operate at a level few others would know. It had been that way as long as he could remember. He was never the fastest or the biggest, but he could maintain a pace. From the first time he competed, he had something he could call his own.

His older brother was not so lucky. At age 22 he was struck head-on by a carful of teenagers at 60 miles per hour. His brother's vehicle was crushed and the hardtop roof collapsed directly onto his head. Permanent injuries resulted and left the brother a shadow of the man he had come to admire and love.

So he had reason to run even harder.

As the marathon reached double digits, it began a fundamental change. Gone were the cornfields and long stretches of stillness that earmarked the early miles of the race. Replacing the countrified air was the first glimpse of the suburbs surrounding northern Milwaukee County. He savored the sight and let himself enter the zone all runners covet. Long glorified by writers with dubious athletic resumes, the zone had been mythologized until it seemed a commonplace occurrence. He knew better. He had been running for a lifetime and could count on both hands the times he had truly entered the zone. For runners the zone was the feeling of lightness and grace that allowed them to skim the land as if they were a singular breeze drifting over the terrain. It was a glorious feeling often obtained in a workout instead of the more important time of a competition.

This time he welcomed its appearance.

His stride lengthened and against all science it was as if his heart rate slowed. For over 38 years his neurons, capillaries, and muscle twitch had adapted to the demands of distance running. Days and months turned into years and the miles hardened every structure from the soles of his feet to a steely competitive thirst. He couldn't place a finger on the day he morphed into a true runner, but it occurred all the same.

And it made him feel whole.

He ran and the scattered passersby scarcely existed. From the sidelines, sporadic claps and shouts of encouragement sounded, but he did little to acknowledge their presence. He had no time for that now. He was entrenched in the race and his focus reached the height needed to compete at the level he craved. That might not be important to more than a handful in the crowd, but it meant everything to him.

He let the zone take him to wherever it would deliver, past the homes sheltering families possessing infinitely more than he had as a child, past the brick palaces and gated communities he could have seen only in his dreams, and beyond the past that never left the present to the time when high school brought on a whole new set of barriers. He had barely reached 5 feet tall and weighed 100 pounds by the time he started freshman year. Despite his size, he dabbled in football until a realization came to the forefront: he needed to run.

Running became his sole release from the burdens circling on all sides. He couldn't quantify the expanding role that running took in his life but the sport gave him a purpose he longed for. By sophomore year he had become a team leader. By season's end he shared the Most Valuable Runner award named by his teammates. If he hadn't before been sure of his place in the world, he was then.

The marathon was nearly halfway done by the time the course entered the edge of Milwaukee. The scattered observers began to increase, and natural gathering points filled with interested parties. Those who knew him from the past gave shouts of encouragement. To some he nodded and to others he mustered a small wave and smile. The muscle memory of decades of running was firmly set on automatic for the remaining miles.

The finality of racing was appealing from early on, having solid ground underfoot with no one to blame for the outcome but himself. Not even the frailties of his father and mother nor events of family could stand in the way. With success he gained respect and that bred into itself. Girls started to notice him, and for the first time a pointed finger wasn't made in derision but rather in admiration. He had no problem in admitting it felt good. Now, decades later, the scattered encouragement from the marathon crowd fed him the same way.

This time, though, he was alone, no family nearby and no father and mother alive to provide conflicting shadows of love and embarrassment. He had gotten to this stage of the race on his own. Today, on a Sunday morning in October, he needed to be strong because it was all he had left.

In many ways, in 1976 he was as strong as he would ever be. He was coming into his own as a runner and was clearly the dominant competitor on his team. He excelled in both cross-country and track at the very time the running boom spread across the United States. By then Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers had become household names and legions of fans mourned the recent death of distance prodigy Steve Prefontaine. He emulated them and set school records in the mile and two-mile events. Multiple Most Valuable Runner awards followed close behind.

Soon enough he discovered something else.

After his father's struggles with alcohol, he vowed that he wanted no part of drinking. Then, per tradition, on his 18th birthday he broke ranks and drank alcohol for the first time. The celebration was at a tavern within walking distance of his home. He had no guilt in imbibing just this once, or if he did it was hid-

den deep and on that night ignored. As soon as the alcohol hit his system, he felt something else; he fit in with classmates on a level he had never known before. As the drinks continued to flow, he discovered a misguided sense of happiness covered under mountains of angst and family turmoil.

It was the start of the first race he had no chance of winning.

He still ran and competed, but after high school his direction became unfocused. After graduation he drifted between various jobs, ran, and with increasing frequency, he drank. Binge drinking was the norm; sipping a beer or two was considered a waste of time, or merely a warm-up for a full night out. College loomed, and although an adequate student, given the lack of home guidance, he never concentrated on studies in more than a half-hearted manner.

But his destiny was fast approaching.

He shook off the cloudy memory and resisted looking back at the string of runners trailing him. Instead he focused on the line of competitors ahead and recognized the critical point of the marathon, a place where the demands of the distance had eroded stored energies. With still well over an hour to go, his mind and body felt the effect of the effort. For some beginning runners, the sensation hit even earlier, and their fate did not include the finish line. His legs throbbed and heaviness settled in, indicating that both stored sugars and fluid had sunk below a comfortable level. The proverbial Wall was approaching, but the race had truly begun.

He focused on the road ahead. The next turn, water stop, or mile marker allowed momentary comfort that



Courtesy of Richard Dodd

► Richard set his all-time PR in the 1983 Lakefront Marathon in 2:19:39.

one more landmark had been reached. Each step took him closer to the white line marking the end of race. With signs of fatigue crowding his thoughts, omnipresent doubts crept in. *Am I fit enough?* he asked himself. *Did I start too fast?* These were questions yet to be answered, and the truth lay in the distance. Then with a flash of a singlet at his side, his thoughts became fragmented.

He recognized the face: George Ogutu, the defending RRCA Grandmaster Champion. Like any runner, the ease of the early miles afforded him the delusions of having a race for the ages. Even against the knowledge of his past afflictions, it took only the first few steps of the race to harken back to when running was easy and free-flowing, where every step was an exercise in the power and spirit of youth.

As his competitor marched by, those days were suddenly a fading memory.

He attempted to match strides but his internal warning light flashed red. A momentary desperation surfaced as his competitor gained yards of separation. He wanted to stay with him but knew it was foolish to burn remaining fuel on such a reckless endeavor. *Maybe it's just not to be*, said the self-doubt that flared.

The same doubt appeared after high school. Despite his father's Yale education, he himself had never had academic expectations or collegiate aspirations. But when he entered a state college, he took a full load of classes and meandered through the coursework. He didn't excel, but he gained traction on the campus by joining the school's cross-country team.

With the focus provided by teammates and coaches, he rose steadily in the ranks of runners. College life afforded him freedom to train, and the results testified to the miles put in. He established himself as the number two runner, and the team won the conference championship by sweeping the first five places. This in turn allowed the team to qualify for the subsequent National Junior College Championship.

As much as academics and athletics filled his time, he was also a regular on the party circuit. He shared a house with three nonathletes who shared a similar fondness for alcohol. House parties were the norm, as was beer flowing from a refrigerator modified to hold a permanently tapped quarter barrel. His drinking escalated and his attention to school was sporadic and unsteady; instead he opted for the easy route of playing poker or frequenting the local taverns. Both alcohol and running blurred the hard truth that he was traveling down a dead-end pathway.

Part of him still missed those days: no responsibility or obligations. Rather, he could just run or drink, in no particular order. In spite of his lack of focus, he could always depend on running to flush the body he had abused the night before. Even hung over he could run better than most. If not effortless, at the very least he could pound out miles until the sins of the previous evening were erased.

The current marathon effort was harder than those days. The miles began to drag and the cumulative exertion weighed heavy. His shoulders tightened and he fought to avoid the shortened stride marking the gradual decline in form. His



vertical hyphen posture slowly transformed into a slight forward lean that threatened his efficiency. He struggled against the aging of the years and the hint of inevitable decline. *Fight it!* whispered a spirit nourishing him at these moments. *Quit!* called another.

He blinked and listened to the first voice. Today was not a day for weakness but rather one of rebirth. To what end he wasn't sure, but he had come too far to stop now. So he straightened and battled the demons that whispered in his ear. *Damn George. Damn the clock,* he thought. *Time doesn't matter. Finishing does.*

He strode harder down the boulevard and beyond a past when, at age 42, he was behind the wheel of a car after a night out with friends. It was only minutes later that he drunkenly nodded off and struck a cement barrier at a high rate of speed. The crash forced him to find an alley and hide the car for the night. Crawling onto the floor of the backseat, he passed out and hoped to avoid detection.

The morning drive home was exhausting, as his hangover was in full bloom. Even worse than the physical pain was the damage to his wife's vehicle. The front end was crushed and the radiator was leaking a trail of fluid. The day disintegrated completely when he was stopped by a county sheriff who noticed the damage to the vehicle. Although he had not consumed liquor since the prior evening, the car reeked of alcohol and a breathalyzer was administered. He somehow passed, but the sheriff demanded a full account of the vehicular damage. He was subsequently given tickets for hit-and-run property damage and failure to report the incident to authorities.

That evening his wife surveyed the damage. She was understandably angry, and he could do little but tell the truth that he had been involved in a drunken mishap. The action was the final event that would end his 14-year marriage.

Soon enough, he was alone again and focused on what he did best: drink and run.

For the first time in his adult life he no longer had anyone to admonish him about his bouts of drinking. In one way he was as free as he had ever been, but he was still a prisoner trapped in an alcohol-fueled life. He imposed self-restraint on his drinking and allowed consumption only every other day. In reality, he more than made up for the day of sobriety by drinking an even larger quantity. Further, he attempted to combat personal loneliness by pursuing women to fill another void in his life. On one more beer-soaked night he blundered into an unsteady relationship that was destined from the outset to fail.

At the 18-mile mark, failure was not an option. But as unwelcomed pain festered in his thighs, the flickering doubts intensified. *Why did I do this?* he asked. *I'm too old. Too many things have happened.* Then as he blinked back the sweat, a runner in front of him slowed to a stop. How easy that looked; just pull over to the sidewalk and stop running. He hadn't quit a race before. In fact, he would embrace pain as if the self-flagellation was warranted for sins witnessed or committed. The thoughts ricocheted in his fatigued mind and he emitted a muted cry.

*I won't stop, he thought, not today!*

The moment passed and the crack in his will was sealed temporarily. He straightened his carriage and reached for a water cup from a volunteer. As he splashed the water onto his heated face, his eyes relayed a silent “Thank you” for the redemptive liquid.

He looked away from the sidewalk and into the uncertainty ahead.

He remembered when he admitted that alcohol had cost him jobs, schooling, and a marriage. It had added unwanted pounds to his sleek physique and both his running and his sanity were suffering. His drinking was full blown; he suffered blackouts that caused a series of self-inflicted injuries from drunken falls. Even the decline in his precious sport and the embarrassment of unsightly bruises didn't curtail his drinking, nor did his first ticket while driving drunk. Truth be told, he could have been ticketed dozens if not hundreds of times. Even after getting caught he believed he could beat the system—after all, he had only gotten pulled over once. He proceeded to pay the fine and performed the required hours in a remedial class for first-time offenders. He went through the instruction with the others in the class but was distinctly out of place. He could handle drinking; he wasn't like them.

He told himself the very same thing the next time he was arrested two months later. His newest offense occurred after another weekend trip to his collegiate home. He was barely over the legal limit, but due to the offense being his second it held graver consequences. Then his third offense occurred prior to even seeing the inside of the courtroom. This time he left no doubt to the arresting officer when after nearly nine hours of drinking his blood alcohol registered nearly four times the legal limit. When he was pulled over he refused a sobriety test; he was caught red-handed and would suffer the consequences. This time, however, a simple slap on the wrist was not an option. He was booked into the Milwaukee Jail Complex with a new title behind his name: repeat offender.

Life at home was no better. Although he was still married to his second wife, she refused to bail him out from jail. Even worse, when he called in sick to both his employer and his coaching job, they took note of the jailhouse phone number. For both occupations and his second marriage, this was the beginning of the end. What was starting was a less savory phase of his life: reporting to the Milwaukee Jail Complex to serve his sentence.

He was confined to a cell block where 60 men were spread among 30 bunks. His incarceration lasted more than five months, and in early winter he was released. To add to his muddled state, he was served divorce papers from his second wife a week earlier. Anger surfaced, and in a twisted form of retribution, he promised himself that he would get drunk upon release as if to show he was still his own man. He kept his vow at a local tavern that offered a free drink to those wearing a jail bracelet. His plan was a success, and he drowned himself in alcohol to the

point that he had to call for a public-funded ride home. Clearly, his stint behind bars had been no deterrent to drinking and if anything it whetted his thirst even more. His addiction was now in full bloom.

At the 20-mile mark, jail seemed a lifetime ago. The mark in the race is romanticized for “hitting the Wall”—a supposed place where stored energies are tapped and the runner starts to devour his own cells. He had never worried about such trivial, contrived landmarks and had trained himself to run well beyond the threshold. But today wasn’t a training day. Nor was he a young man with the cockiness of youth bolstering him. He was decades beyond his peak, and the years and miles left him running closer to the breakdown lane. This time the 20-mile marker was more important, more real, more of a threat toward what he had set out to accomplish: to finish a race that meant more than all the others.

A small crowd gathered at the marker as if expecting the runners to drop like soldiers in battle. They urged the competitors on and echoed a variety of exhortations so muddled he could hardly distinguish one from the other. He gave a half-wave in gratitude and found himself becoming emotional again. *Get a grip, for god’s sake!* a voice called. *Dig deep and focus!* He had preached the same mantra to countless runners he had mentored in a bygone day. Now it was time to take his own advice. He shook his arms and tried to force the fatigue to drip from his fingertips. Rolling his neck, the release of tension was nearly measurable and he continued onward.

Now was his time to forge ahead and finish what he had started.

His addictive and compulsive personality had always been a slippery thing. While it helped him on the roads and aided in accumulating countless miles, it was a fault that marred his being. Was he an addict? Or was he just a runner who drank to excess? It came to the point that a specific label didn’t matter anymore.

He was simply a loser on a fast track to nowhere.

He drank daily with no thought of tomorrow. Beer flowed like a fountain and there was never enough to quench his thirst. After his jail sentence, ubiquitous 30-packs of cheap beer disappeared on a regular basis. His mother had passed and the loneliness that accompanies a parent’s death enveloped him like a shroud. He drank more and ran less.

The imbalance didn’t even seem to matter anymore.

Now, at 22 miles, he felt a fire stirring. The age-group leader who passed him earlier reappeared ahead. He was clearly struggling, and the runner’s decline bolstered his spirits. The formerly clipped gait was refreshed and a surge of adrenaline replaced the lactic acid boiling in his legs. He neared the runner and slowed before making a decisive move. Passing his opponent, weary recognition overtook both combatants. A nod of respect was given and one was returned by his competitor. His opponent was clearly drained and the exhaustion outlining his face was real.

It was a look he recognized well.

He had the same look a year after being released from jail. On a cold December day he found himself locked out of his humble efficiency apartment. He was seeking shelter with three maxed-out credit cards, but even his sole remaining drinking buddy tired of footing the tab. Using his last two dollars for bus fare, he returned a single quarter in change to his pocket. The ride to downtown Milwaukee didn't take long, and after he got off, the spewing of the bus echoed in the night air. He walked to a grated bridge overlooking the flowing ice shards of the Milwaukee River. He gripped the railings, closed his eyes, and drifted.

The ground swirled as he contemplated a leap into nothingness. He knew the jump would end a life that had become something less, a life that had been clouded by mistakes and a disease he could not run away from. He rocked on his heels and a cold wind whipped his face. He had reached the end and wondered what would result from his demise. Would anyone even know? Worse, would anyone even care?

He opened his eyes and stared at the icy floes. Faces appeared, first those of his parents—dysfunctional, alcoholic, enabling, but living their flawed humanity as best they were able. A twin brother navigating a successful career in spite of the turmoil. Another brother damaged by an accident that left him with permanent brain injuries. Two sisters, each somehow married for over 40 years. Then the faces of a menagerie of runners who had digested his words of experience in their own quest for athletic greatness. The water below flowed silently and emitted a frozen fog that hovered ghostlike over the disappearing faces.

The moistness in the corners of his eyes clouded the river. He took a frozen breath and let air fill his lungs. The ground stopped its spin and his grip on the railing softened.

He stepped back.

After 24 miles he knew he would finish. At that moment he didn't look pretty, but in the marathon, pretty has no place. Bystanders who recognized him from his glory days shouted their encouragement. Old friends, runners, and high school students alike echoed surprise at his appearance and urged him on the final drive. In the distance, he viewed the outline of the downtown where the county jail and the river bridge were within a heartbeat of each other. Deeper within the city bowels was the rescue mission that had started him on the journey toward a new life.

Memories flashed and the final long, sloping downhill battered his thighs, but the pain didn't matter. Physical pain was just a minor nuisance, one that could be controlled by resolve and will. It was the emotional pain that had been swallowed whole and tucked away into darkness where it festered. Countless miles smothered it, alcohol tempered it, but it could never be extinguished or forgotten. It was the emotional pain that gagged him as he struggled through the final yards of the marathon. The finish line was yards ahead—a series of metal barriers outlined the path and the crowds providing the obligatory clapping had no idea of the journey

◀ Richard nearing the finish line of the 2011 Lakefront Marathon.



© Sally Denor Koch

he had taken. More than just 26.2 miles, he arrived at this moment after a lifetime of false promises, lies, and deceptions to family and friends. Even more important, until the night on the bridge he had lied to himself. Maybe it was his destiny to stand there, maybe it was God's plan, but the hard truth was that he had looked into the abyss and found his way home—to a finish line that was finally in reach.

His body floated the final yards as if the ground was in sync with the purity of the moment. Hearing nothing but the rush of blood in his ears, he turned the final corner and willed himself toward the finish line. This time the clock didn't matter, nor did the place, or even the medal that would eventually hang from his neck. What did matter was the fulfilling exhaustion and cleansing sweat that oozed from his pores. The moment was surreal, one he had dreamed of and that was now utterly within reach. His eyes moistened at the moment, at the struggle of life and at the distance he had traveled that at one time seemed insurmountable.

► The start of a new journey—2011 RRCA National Marathon Grandmaster Champion Richard Dodd.



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Whipping himself toward the finish line, he crossed the barrier and raised arms and eyes to the sky. He walked a few yards and braced himself from collapsing. His muscles quivered at the effort and he placed both hands on his thighs. He closed his eyes and let his breath return to a normal cadence. When he was able, he completed one final task.

He went to his knees and for the first time in his adult life knelt on solid ground.

*Richard Dodd has maintained his sobriety and is currently the boys' and girls' head cross-country coach and assistant track coach at Hartford Unified High School in Wisconsin. He also coaches runners privately through RUNNING'S RAD ([www.runningsrad.com](http://www.runningsrad.com)). He is the race director of the Adrenaline Marathon/ Half/Quarter and 5K in West Bend, Wisconsin.* 