

HumanRace

NEWS, TRENDS, AND REGULAR RUNNERS DOING AMAZING THINGS



Blind Ambition

Sight-impaired marathoners spur each other to ever faster times in Boston

BY ANNETTE
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ONE SATURDAY in January, Kurt Fiene, 47, went out for a 5:30 a.m. training run around his hometown of Elmhurst, Illinois. It was 17 degrees below zero. Patches of ice dotted the seven-mile route that Fiene, a biology teacher for students with learning impairments, has memorized. His left hand rested on the right shoulder of his training partner, Lori Dunn, who steered him clear of the snow and potholes that mark the street's surface.

On most runs, Adrian Broca, a 32-year-old graduate student in Santa Monica, California, goes it alone on a bike path without obstacles. Whenever possible, he does 18 to 26 miles on a stretch of highway in the Mojave Desert in order to train at a higher altitude. There, Broca can faintly discern the white line of the shoulder against the blacktop, and he feels with his left foot where the roadbed ends and the dirt of the surrounding terrain begins.

With PRs around 2:50, Fiene and Broca potentially rank among the 500 fastest men competing in the 2009 Boston Marathon. Unlike the other runners coming out of the first corral at the race's start, Fiene



FACE OFF

Fiene (left) and Broca (right) will compete for the visually impaired title in Boston.

LEFT: LOCATION: ELMHURST COLLEGE



CLOSE COMPETITORS

Broca (left) and his guide trailed Fiene (right) by a minute at last year's race.

and Broca can barely see the course. Both have severe visual impairments, and for them, training presents bigger challenges than fitting in 70-mile weeks.

But they relish the chance to compete against sighted runners at Boston—and against each other. In 2007, Broca finished first in the visually impaired division in 3:00:12. In 2008, Fiene seized the title in 2:55:00, with Broca just behind him in 2:56:18. (The third place finisher was 25 minutes behind Broca.) “Boston is a show-down between me and Kurt,” Broca says.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Broca lost his vision in 1994 to a genetic disorder that damaged his optic nerve. He can distinguish between light and dark but little else. “I thought my life was ruined,” he says. “I ran into things and was too embarrassed to ask for help.”

After barely graduating high school, Broca fell into depression. He started walking to improve his mood, and gradually began running by teaching himself how to make out “the gray of the curb from the black of the street.” In 2001, he ran the Los Angeles Marathon in 3:42:58, tentatively following the fuzzy shapes of other runners. “Running has given me a whole new attitude,” Broca says. “It gives me a sense of purpose and mission.”

Fiene was born without irises. He has no vision in his right eye, and 20/400 vision in his left. He can tell if people have long or short hair, but he can't make out the color of their eyes. He started running to lose weight after graduating from college, and in 1994, he competed at the International Paralympic Committee World Championships, taking home bronze, silver, and gold medals. “My main goal

with running is to promote causes for the visually impaired,” Fiene says. “I want to give back to the United States Association of Blind Athletes and other organizations that have helped me in my life.”

Broca will line up on April 20 for his fifth consecutive Boston Marathon, and according to the rules, he can use guides. He's recruited four from a Boston-area running club, all of whom can run at least 6:20 pace for a 10-K. He's saving the fastest, Allison McCabe, for last. “I'll keep an eye on his competitor,” she says.

Meanwhile, because Fiene has limited sight in his left eye, he is prohibited from using guides. The blurry walls of spectators help him figure out where to run. Boston's point-to-point course is easier for Fiene than more winding, rural races where he can miss turns. “In road races I'm always slowing down, looking for landmarks,” he says. “I think if I didn't have to do this, I could run a 2:40.”

Broca's race strategy is simple: beat Fiene. “The race starts for me at mile 16 when Kurt starts to slow down,” he says. But he hasn't lost sight of the bigger picture. “Running marathons has allowed me to view my blindness as a positive thing,” he says. “We can be more disabled in life by having a negative attitude than by being physically impaired.” **EW**