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CHASING GLORY THEY CAN FEEL, NOT SEE



ERIC GRIGORIAN FOR THE GLOBE

Adrian Broca (right), the fastest blind marathoner in the country, trains for the defense of his Boston Marathon visually-impaired division title with friend and guide Matt Skinner.

Visually-impaired marathoners dream big

By Shira Springer

GLOBE STAFF

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Carrying his collapsible white cane, Adrian Broca is running along the Pacific coast but dreaming of Boston. The pale gray concrete bike path ahead is invisible to him, blending into the surrounding sand. He can make out the dark blur of black pavement when he's on it, but little else.

Sounds come through loud and clear, however. He hears the hum of cyclists speeding closer, but can't tell if they have enough room to safely pass. Suddenly, he feels a sharp tug on the tether he grips in his right hand. A training partner guides Broca out of harm's way. Near the end of the 10-mile run, Broca drops the tether and races to the finish, his guides giving chase.

"When I run with my legs really turning, I feel alive," Broca said. "It's liberating."

Broca, who lost his sight at 18 to a hereditary

condition that damaged his optic nerve, is the fastest blind marathoner in the country. Tomorrow, the 31-year-old hopes to defend his title in the Boston Marathon's visually impaired division and meet the "A" qualifying standard for the 2008 Beijing Paralympics of 2 hours 46 minutes. That would place Broca roughly 35 minutes behind the Boston finish times of the world's top male marathoners.

"Once I hear the gun go off, I forget about being visually impaired and feel like any other runner out there who has one goal in mind," said Broca. "When I started running around my neighborhood after losing my sight, bumping into light posts and bus stop benches, I was fighting off my blindness, telling myself that this is not going to stop me."

He leads a field of 19 runners — 15 men and 4 women — who will run the 26.2-mile course

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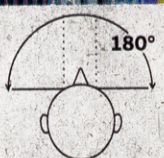
ONE RUNNER'S VIEW

Kurt Fiene, the second-fastest visually-impaired US marathoner, has no vision in his right eye and 20/400 vision in his left eye. That puts him in category B3, prohibiting him from using a guide. The image below simulates Fiene's vision compared with a normal one.



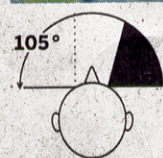
Normal vision

Focus is clear, and peripheral vision — or side-to-side view — is about 180 degrees.



Fiene's vision

Focus is 20 times worse in left eye, peripheral view is 105 degrees due to blind right eye.



SOURCE: Kurt Fiene; US Association of Blind Runners; Eye Health Services

JOAN McLAUGHLIN/GLOBE STAFF

"When I started running around my neighborhood after losing my sight, bumping into light posts and bus stop benches, I was fighting off my blindness, telling myself that this is not going to stop me."

ADRIAN BROCA, who will run in tomorrow's Boston Marathon

Real sense of accomplishment here

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without being able to see it. Among them are three totally blind runners, who are categorized as B1. Broca falls into the B2 classification because he can just barely make out the vague shape of a hand when held close. He will be allowed four guides to assist him through the race.

The logistics alone are daunting. Each guide will cover roughly one-quarter of the course. Depending on how many other runners are crowded around him, Broca either will use an 18-inch modified dog leash as a tether, gripping one end with his right hand, or ask his guide to just run alongside. Finding guides fast enough to keep up can be a challenge.

Broca's toughest competition will come from Kurt Fiene, the second-fastest visually impaired US marathoner, with a personal best of 2:52:55. Like Broca, Fiene knows the Boston Marathon is his last, best opportunity to qualify for the Paralympics.

Born with a condition that left him without irises, Fiene, 46, has no vision in his right eye and 20/400 vision in his left, putting him into the B3 category. B3 runners are prohibited from using guides. During the later stages of a marathon, Fiene struggles with vision in his good eye.

"My eyes get tired and a little blurry because I've got to watch a little more than most people do for cracks or holes or people cutting in front of me," said Fiene. "But who can see straight at 20 miles?"

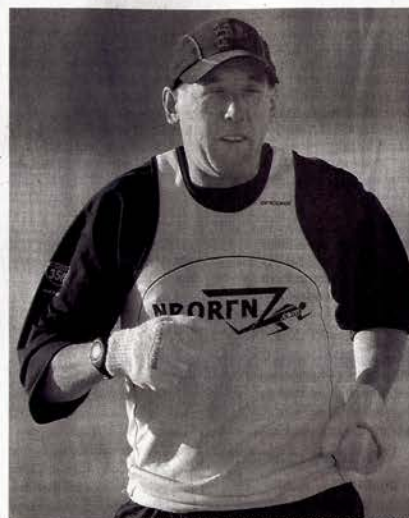
Advantages, obstacles

Nothing is the same for these runners — nothing except the determination to run at a champion's pace.

While anyone attempting to run the Boston Marathon averaging 6 minutes 20 seconds per mile



Adrian Broca (left) can be tethered during a run but finds the sport liberating; Kurt Fiene runs despite having no vision in his right eye and 20/400 in his left.



ERIC GRIGORIAN/FOR THE GLOBE (LEFT), DAVE WEAVER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

expects physical and mental challenges, Broca and Fiene lose time at places most runners pass with ease, though there are some unexpected advantages. They cannot, for example, see Heartbreak Hill rise in front of them, missing the view that instills fear and dread and slows many runners. But Broca and Fiene agree it is a poor tradeoff for the obstacles they face.

In the packed starting area and through the first few miles before the crowd of runners thins, Broca remains reluctantly tethered to his guide. The leash inhibits his arm movement, making it difficult to establish a rhythm. It does, however, allow Broca and his guide to maneuver more efficiently around runners. With a tug here, a few

verbal cues, a tug there, they can make their way into a small open patch, and repeat the process as Broca picks off other marathoners. "I'm OK holding onto the tether, but I feel I can go faster without it," said Broca. "I've gone ahead of my guide in Boston, dropping the tether when I feel I need to push the pace."

The relatively straight, point-to-point layout of Boston's course allows Broca to run faster when he wants, though he needs his guide nearby, especially for right-angle turns. To get Broca safely through turns, his guide serves as a human GPS. When the right turn from Washington Street onto Commonwealth Avenue approaches tomorrow, Broca's guide will warn him.

Then the guide will shout, "Right, right, right" until they have completed the turn.

Fiene relies on his good eye and the crowds lining the course to keep on track. In smaller, more rural races, Fiene has missed turns and gotten lost many times.

At water stations, Fiene must slow almost to a stop and grab a cup by both hands, otherwise he doesn't get enough water and risks dehydration. Although Broca relishes the independence running provides and ran his first seven marathons without assistance, he recognized he needed guides to retrieve water during the sweltering 2004 Los Angeles Marathon. Running by himself, he missed several water stations and nearly suffered heatstroke, though he still finished the race.

"I knew I was limiting myself without guides, not only with all the turns, but getting water and having to ask runners what mile it was," said Broca. "That race I realized I was putting my life in danger by not letting people know I was blind. As I got more competitive, I wasn't enjoying running as much doing it myself. I knew I wouldn't be able to reach my full potential."

While guides tell Broca his pace, Fiene often runs without the benefit of knowing his mile times. Sometimes he simply can't see mile markers and therefore doesn't know when to check his watch. At Boston, Fiene benefits from rubber mats placed across the road every 5 kilometers to record data from timing chips used to track runners' progress. The mats, in combination with a talking stopwatch that announces elapsed time with the push of a button, will enable Fiene to better pace himself.

"Running is a sport I can do on my own and that's why I got into it," said Fiene, who was a medalist at the International Paralympics Committee World Championships in the 1,500, 5,000 and 10,000 meters before focusing on the marathon. "I play golf, but I can't go to the golf course by myself be-

cause I can't see where the ball goes off the tee. If I know the area where I'm running, I don't need somebody with me."

On the path around Lake Zorinsky in Omaha where Fiene regularly runs, however, he doesn't mind company. He sets an impressively steady pace for other runners. For that reason, women's Olympic Marathon Trials qualifier Christy Nielsen calls Fiene the "perfect training partner." While Fiene keeps workouts on target, his training partners alert him to random icy patches, dogs, and speed bumps.

"When I tell people my training partner is blind, they say, 'What?'" said Nielsen. "But what's funny about Kurt is that when you go anywhere with him, he's the one who tells you where to go. He's so in tune with what's around him. I'm wowed by him when he kicks my butt all the time."

Fiene will cheer Nielsen to the finish of the women's Trials today. Then, they will switch roles for the Marathon. Nielsen believes Fiene has the talent to run a 2:45 Marathon, which would have placed him among the top 25 sighted Masters (ages 40-49) runners last year.

A long journey

Approximately 300 yards from the Marathon finish line, Broca plans to fully extend his cane and hold it aloft, showing his pride in representing visually impaired athletes. It is also a way to underscore just how far he has come.

When he first lost his sight, Broca tumbled into a deep depression and thought about suicide. He walked around without a cane, preferring the bruises he got bumping into everyday obstacles to the appearance of a disability. On his first training runs, Broca ventured out alone and returned home with cuts from the times he tripped and fell. Still, running made Broca feel normal.

"I did contemplate suicide, but my family would have been so hurt," said Broca, who is Mexican-American. "I couldn't cause them

that harm. They had always been supportive, encouraging me to focus on what I could do. When I ran into things, they patched me up and just said, 'Be more careful out there.'"

Broca ran cross-country in high school, but he was an average runner who never took the sport seriously when he could see. As his vision declined, he became increasingly frustrated in class, and cross-country offered a refuge until he no longer could see where to run.

Getting lost on courses embarrassed him. It took several years before Broca found his way as a blind man, mastering adaptive technologies, enrolling in college, then finally returning to running. He figured marathons would be easier to handle by himself than shorter road races with more participants and more turns.

In 2001, when Broca finished his first marathon following only three months of training, he fell in love with the sense of individual accomplishment. He kept entering marathons and kept improving.

Hopes and dreams

After finishing his training run, Broca enters the Santa Monica Beach Club with his training partners. He feels for the door frame with his right hand.

Then, extending his cane, he pokes at the set of stairs leading to a back patio, where he sits and speaks of his hopes like any other athletic star — for ever improving times, for finding a sponsor, for the day when there will be prize money for visually impaired athletes.

"I've worked hard for what I've achieved, and I feel whatever time I end up running was the best time I could do on that day and wasn't because I couldn't see," said Broca.

"I don't think I'd be running if I hadn't lost my sight. I wouldn't be pushing myself."

Shira Springer can be reached at springer@globe.com