Los Angeles Marathon 2019: Monkey Butt for a Cure.

I've run a few marathons in my time, including LA, so I was aware of what to expect in lots of ways, but I wasn’t at all prepared for the experience that awaited me as the Los Angeles "featured marathoner" for the ALS association in 2019. Here is a brief write up of what happened and my impressions of the event.

My lifelong friend Greg and I set out for LA on Saturday afternoon, arriving at the downtown hotel around 12:30. We checked into the room and Greg went off the expo to pick up the bibs and race packet. Two other old friends, Duncan and Burr, had a suite in the same hotel and I went up to hang out with them. It was a raucous afternoon, and our plan to rest up for the race was dashed by a giddy feeling of expectation and excitement. Greg soon came back with our race bibs and then we were joined by more friends for dinner. It was a big party, and we stayed out late, ate too much, and yes, knocked down a few beers in the process. We didn't get into bed until after 10:00, which was a little late for a pre-race night, but it was worth it.

The alarm went off at 3:00 am, and we sprung into action. Well, maybe sprung is a stretch, but we managed to work the coffee maker anyway. Greg went off to drop his car at the finish area, and I was picked up promptly at 4:00 by Mark, Martin and Victoria. We arrived at Dodger Stadium nice and early, beating the mad rush so we'd have time to set up the wheelchair and get to the start line with time to spare. I'm a big believer in being early, so this made me happy. Pretty soon the rest of the wheelchair competitors began to arrive, and I was once again reminded of the resilience of the human spirit as I watched challenged athletes climb, hobble and crawl into their high-tech race chairs. I was humbled and moved by their spirit. It was an amazing way to begin the day.

We made our way to the start line, where we met up with Tom, Greg and John, who along with Martin comprised the heart of the "pushers." These guys would get me 26.2 and I had no doubt as I looked at the determination on their faces. I was met by a hoard of friends (those crazy furries) at the start who cheered as we staged, took a million photos and provided me and the rest of the racers with a much-needed early boost. I have wonderful friends.

The wheelchairs went off first, and then the hand cranks, and then it was us crossing the start at 6:42. I've run a ton of races, and I know the excitement that comes with the start of a long course, but I was unprepared for
the flood of emotion that overtook me in the first 100 yards. Tears ran down my face as I tried to keep it together and wave and smile at the crowd. I did a poor job of it, I'm afraid. I was acutely aware that the guys pushing me were in for a slog, and that they had sacrificed a lot to be there, and I felt so lucky to be in that seat that I just couldn't bottle up the emotion. So, I let the tears go, for me and for everyone that had sat, and would sit, in that chair. ALS is a cruel bastard, but the silver lining is that you see the real heart of human kindness demonstrated over and over again.

Mile 1 came up quick, and we soon joined by our first mile sponsor. What a great feeling! Fresh legs and the streets to ourselves. It was a magic time before we overtook by the elite runners, and then the rest of the hoard. I felt energized; the wheelchair rode smooth, I was a tad chilly but not too bad, and the sun was coming up on a beautiful clear morning. Good stuff... No, great stuff!

The miles started to click off, the sun came up and then we were over taken by the elite women, the elite men and the flood of other racers. And what a flood it was! I was amazed by the number of folks that cheered us on as they ran by, gave me high fives, or briefly shared a story about a family member who had succumbed to ALS. It was extremely moving that people took time out of their race to acknowledge us. A few more tears flowed but I managed to keep them in check this time.

The furries joined us again somewhere around mile 7, I think, and I was whisked along by two dogs, a bird, and three foxes. The crowd went crazy as we motored along under animal power, and I can't imagine what a spectacle we must have been. Once again, I have really amazing friends and a support group like this is a blessing.

Suddenly we were at mile 11, and the ALS booth. It was wonderful to see more fresh, friendly faces wearing those bright red shirts. The best part of this race was meeting up with the new mile sponsors. Some I had met before and some were new to me, but they were all my heroes and they all got major hugs. Every time there were fresh hands on the chair, I felt enervated and proud. The mile sponsors are the heart of this event and I'm incredibly honored by their efforts.

The miles continued to spin by. I was dreading being in that chair for 6 hours, but the time flew by very fast indeed. Before I knew it we were at mile 20 and my best friend Don and his sister Laura stepped in to push. They are both accomplished racers and we covered the ground in record time. Tom ran ahead and parted the sea of humanity as we raced along. It felt like I was flying! Seeing Don and Laura take over on push duty brought the tears on again, but by this time I was wearing sunglasses so no one could see me blubbering. I honestly didn't expect to be so overcome with emotion during the race but looking back on it I'm not surprised. How could I not? The love was tangible, expressed in sweat and sore muscles. That's real-world love.

My friend Bill and his lovely wife Katie joined us around that time, and I was thrilled to see them. I was the best man in their wedding many years ago and their participation was most welcome. Such amazing people all around me! Mile 24 soon arrived and my running group took over for the remainder of the race. I've run with this crew for years and they are all wonderful folks and great athletes. We could smell the finish line and the sea breeze and could hear the roar of the crowd. The race was almost over, and I remember thinking I wanted it to go on and on. In that wheelchair I wasn't just that guy with ALS who can hardly walk, I was a super hero...
who could make the crowd cheer with a simple wave, and the day to
day terror of living with this disease was far from my mind.

And all too soon, the race came to a close. I wanted badly to walk
across the finish, but I knew after sitting for six hours my legs would be
practically nonfunctional, so I leaned on my friends to get me there.
With Jeff supporting me on the left, and Don on the right, I wobbled
across the line under my own power. What an amazing feeling! And
not a dry eye in the house. I will never, ever forget that moment.

After we made our way out of the maze of barricades, we managed to
part the crowd and met everyone at 800 Degrees for pizza and beer. I
don't think a cold IPA has ever tasted that good! There was a hoard of
friends and supporters already there and they cheered loudly as I was
wheeled in. What an indescribable end to a perfect day. We ate pizza
and drank beer and talked about the race in detail. My good friend
Duncan finished his first marathon and we shared the best hug ever. I
was so proud of his efforts and commitment! Greg finally made it in;
he was running a sore ankle and his grit and determination to finish speak volumes about him as a person.

Eventually, folks began to straggle off, and I reluctantly said my goodbyes. Living with ALS means that
sometimes goodbyes are really goodbyes, and there were more tears as I hugged everyone one more time.
Greg drove me home and spent the remainder of the day passed out on the sofa. It felt like a dream and I was
so proud of everyone that participated. What an amazing thing
these folks did for me and for everyone that suffers, or will suffer,
from this stoopid disease.

Would I do it again? Hell yes I would! If I'm still physically able next
year I'd be proud to ride in the chair. The reality is that probably
won't happen, though, and that's why fundraising like this is so
important.

Every dollar brings us closer to a cure. Every mile counts.

You can, and do, make a difference.

Thank you.

Tony

- Tony Barrett passed away on April 5th, 2019. His supporters have created a walk team in his memory.
  If you wish to join or support Team Tony, click here.