



THE TRUE SPIRIT
RUN
SOCIAL
ISSUE

BROTHERS IN ARMS



WHEN **MATTHEW REES** HELPED THE STRICKEN **DAVID WYETH** TO THE LINE AT 2017'S VIRGIN MONEY LONDON MARATHON, HIS ACT OF **SELF-SACRIFICE** AND **KINDNESS** GAVE US AN IMAGE OF SPORT AT ITS **MOST NOBLE**, ENCAPSULATING THE TRUE **SPIRIT OF**

LONDON'S SHOWPIECE RACE - AND OF RUNNING ITSELF. HERE, THEY TELL **THEIR STORY**



Matthew pulled David to his feet and said, 'Let's get you there'

DAVID 'My preparation had been exemplary; this was my first London Marathon, after all. I had averaged 75 miles a week for 20 weeks, peaking at around 90 miles. Coming down from Manchester, I stayed with friends in Clapham the night before the race. At the start in Blackheath, I was in the Good For Age area (as I'd run under 3:05 in my debut marathon in Manchester). This meant more space to chill out and focus.'

MATTHEW 'I came to London the day before on a coach organised by a few clubs in the Swansea area. We got our numbers and then tried to relax in the hotel. I was excited to be getting out there but also nervous because I knew what was to come and knew that, at some point, it was going to get very difficult. I'd had a few niggles in training that were playing on my mind, but I still hoped to dip under my PB of 2:29, which I'd run in the 2016 London Marathon.'

D 'I was running with an old school friend, a bit of an inspiration to me. All my family were there: my long-suffering wife, my two children, aged five and seven, and my mum and dad. I was raising money for the hospice that had cared for my uncle, who'd died the previous year. Because I hate asking people for money, I thought I needed to

offer an extra incentive – hence my aim to run under 2:40.'

M 'My PB had got me Championship entry, which meant our own starting area, with perks like more toilets. I was lying on the grass, trying to get into the zone. Next to me was Josh Griffiths, the 23-year-old student who ended up being the first Brit home.'

D 'You spend the taper feeling sluggish and anxious, then the gun goes and you have this amazing release. I felt myself flying along. I looked at my watch and saw that I was ticking along nicely at six-minute miles. But nothing prepares you for that wall of noise, the crowds 10-deep seemingly the whole way round. My friend alongside me, who has bags of experience, was telling me to keep calm.'

M 'I went off at my target pace and felt good. My dad, stepmum, brother and sister were all on the route. Strangely, even with all the noise of a marathon, if someone you know calls your name, you can often pick them out. I saw my family around mile 10 and then at various points after hat. The first time I saw them I was smiling and waving, but later they could tell that my race wasn't going as planned.'

D 'I did 1:18 for the half and felt really solid. I was taking on a drink every other mile; I was carrying gels and picking up more at agreed points. Coming up to mile 15, I remember seeing a good friend and high-fiving him. If I was a betting man, then, at that point, I'd have put money on hitting my target time.'

M 'Before halfway, the niggle I'd had in my calf started to flare up and I began struggling. I couldn't run my normal stride. I stopped and tried to stretch it out. But nothing seemed to work. At that point I realised that it was going to be a long, long way to the finish.'

D 'I'd broken the race down into three chunks: get through the first 10 miles; then the 20; and then the race proper begins. I knew that for the last six miles I'd have to get stuck in. But I started to struggle. I remember reaching a water

station and I couldn't coordinate taking the bottle; twice it hit my fingertips and fell to the floor. It was a clear sign that I wasn't in control.'

M 'My overriding emotion was frustration that it hadn't gone to plan. But as the miles ticked by I started to do some maths in my head. Maybe I could still get under three hours, or even 2:50. Even when the A goal has gone, you go for a B goal or a C goal.'

D 'On the long slog up Embankment, coming out of the tunnels into the sunlight, my eyes just wanted to close and sleep. It was utter fatigue. That was another warning sign. I'd prepared a detailed mental plan for when the race got really tough and I probably executed it too well: I crashed through a lot of the signals to ease up or back off. I remember feeling a strong sense of regret as I approached Westminster. Something I'd had as my focus was the hope that I could be an inspiration to my children – do something they could be proud of and, as they grew up, maybe emulate. But when the family saw me they were horrified; I think I looked an absolute state.'

M 'There came a point when I realised that I was definitely going to finish. I began to get some rhythm back. Not at the pace I wanted, but I knew a good time was still on the cards. I love a sprint finish so, taking that final corner, I was

'MY BODY WAS GOING INTO SHUTDOWN MODE AND FOCUSING AWAY FROM THE RUNNING ACTION TO PROTECT THE VITAL ORGANS'

INTERVIEWS: DUNCAN CRAIG. PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY (OPENER AND TOP LEFT), LONDON MARATHON (TOP RIGHT)



Matthew helps a clearly distressed David over the line at the 2017 London Marathon

just starting to pick it up when I saw David out of the corner of my eye. I could see that he wasn't running anymore, that he was walking in a really strange way, so I kept an eye on him as I came round the corner.'

D 'As I entered Birdcage Walk I was staggering alarmingly. My calves were cramping up, so I was only really capable of a fast walk; my arms were pumping but I couldn't lift my knees. I knew my action was weird but I didn't care how I looked. I still had that drive to reach the line. My body was essentially going into shutdown mode and focusing away from the running action to protect the vital organs. I was losing motor function. I'd put myself in a critical state by burning all the energy I had. All I could think was, "How have I screwed this up?"'

M 'David was beginning to stagger, so I ran over to him. I wanted to help but I also wanted to give him some space to see if he could make it on his own; he'd already come so far and the finish line was in sight. But it was pretty obvious that he wasn't going to be able to. He started to veer off left towards the cones and then fell to the ground. At that point I realised I wasn't going to leave him – I was going to make sure he got to the finish.'

D 'I remember hearing this reassuring voice in my ear and at that point I buckled; I was almost letting go from the survival point of view. I felt there was someone who would look after me. But at the same time I felt frustration for Matt; we didn't know each other, I had got myself into this state – let me deal with it. When he got me back on my feet, he said he wasn't leaving and just kept saying "Let's get you there." It was amazing. If Matthew hadn't been there I'd have been wheeled away in a chair and I don't think they would have been obliged to wheel me over the line. I was aware of the paramedics circling, ready to pick me up if Matthew had left and I think Matt knew that. He was very astute in that regard.'

M 'I didn't see the paramedics but I knew there was a possibility that they might scoop him up. Looking back at the footage, I could see that they were almost on their way to get him. But it was just 200m to the end and I knew there was a medical station there, where he could get the attention he needed. Thought of my own time just went out of my mind at that point. Would I have acted differently if I'd been on for a PB? It's hard to say, but I like to think I'd have acted in the same way.' ➔

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Since his collapse, David Wyeth has been on a voyage of discovery to learn the reasons behind it, and the lessons it can teach us all

UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENED

'After the race I spoke with Dr Courtney Kipps, the assistant medical director for the London Marathon. He told me there's no magic equation

to ensure optimal performance, and that what worked for one performance isn't guaranteed to work for another. This is because of the variable

state your body is in – sleeplessness, stress, infection and inflammation can all place unpredictable demands on your energy reserves. According to Kipps, the manner in

which I stumbled, then dropped to the floor on The Mall, had the hallmarks of a process known in sports medicine as the 'Foster Collapse Position'. A study in the journal *Sports Medicine* explains it like this: 'Extreme fatigue could overwhelm the athlete's regulatory and motor control mechanisms and attenuates the capacity to maintain coordinated

movement. Continuing to attempt to reach the finish line in this impaired state is also perhaps indicative of high psychological pathologies such as diminished sensitivity to feedback or extreme motivational drives.'

Matthew's intervention saved me from assuming the 'Full Foster' stage – crawling to the finish on knees and elbows.'

THE NUTRITION FACTOR

'As I tried to link my collapse to one event, one elusive piece of toast that would have got me across the line, Dr Kipps cautioned against oversimplifying and focusing solely on one aspect of my fuel strategy. I've therefore looked at a range of factors. Did I get the quantity and balance wrong during carb-

loading before the race? The evening before race day, I stopped eating at 7pm, so as not to compromise sleep, but would my race have been saved by my topping up the tank on arrival at my overnight stay? During the race I consumed six gels – I plan to review this frequency and timing of gel intake. In the weeks leading up to the target race, I'll do more practice

using gels at planned race frequency to train the gut to be able to handle the volume.'

THE MENTAL ANGLE

'From a detailed discussion of my preparation, Dr Kipps singled out my psychological state of mind. My first marathon in Manchester, in April 2016, had taught me that you need to be able to ➔

D 'As I crossed the line I was conscious of Matt disappearing and me being placed on a bed. Strangely, I was aware that I hadn't stopped my watch so as the medical staff turned away I was able to lift one arm over to the other and stop it. It was scary how little function I had. My quads would not contract to enable me to stand up, but I was entirely lucid throughout. I spent 90 minutes in the tent and from the looks I was getting I was scared I might have done some permanent damage, or have an underlying medical condition that would mean this was going to be the last time I'd run. I confess I wept at that thought; running means that much to me.'

M 'I hadn't really seen David's face up to then because he'd been at my side but as we crossed the line I caught a glance and realised just how not with it he was. He had this glazed look. I shook his hand and asked his name before he was ushered off, but I didn't catch it. I thought I would check the race number and try to make contact to find out if he was OK. I collected my medal and retrieved my bag, only to find my phone going mad with calls. The BBC got through and wanted me to get back to the finish line for an interview. Then the race put us both up in a hotel because they wanted us to speak to the media again the next day. It was surreal.'

D 'I didn't see Matt again until that evening and I got an immediate sense of the sort of guy he was. Every single media outlet was trying to get through to me; I have a brother who works for the BBC and when we met up at King's Cross his phone was red-hot. It was madness.'

'WE WERE THE ONES CAUGHT ON CAMERA, BUT IT WAS GREATER THAN US. WHAT PEOPLE WERE SEEING WAS SPORTSMANSHIP'

M 'Walking away from the race, I remember thinking, "I could quite easily not have finished this", but I'd made it to the end and there was a reason for that – there was someone there who needed my help. It was a nice realisation. What happened with David gave my race a meaning that it wouldn't otherwise have had.'

D 'Matt and I have spent loads of time together since and we've become good friends. I didn't start running again until I'd been checked out thoroughly and my wife and I had had some time to talk and think about it. But after being given the all clear, Matt and I ran the Great Manchester Run – which is my home fixture – last May, then went down to his neck of the woods to do the Swansea Half. We both then got invited to the Amsterdam Marathon in October, and even shared a room when we were invited up to Liverpool for Sports Personality of the Year (SPOTY) in December. We had a blast.'

M 'David and I met under very peculiar circumstances but, however we'd met, we would have been mates. We have so much in common. We've run three races since and it's 2-1 to me! He ran a great race in Amsterdam and it's great to see him doing so well. We always joke that we might need to help each other out again. SPOTY capped a very surreal year; I never imagined I'd be anywhere



near that event, talking to heroes like Paula Radcliffe and Steve Cram, who both remembered us from the day. I spoke to Jo Pavey and she said we embodied what sport is all about. That was amazing to hear from one of our sporting inspirations.'

D 'I suppose that we're like a double act now. I'm deaf in one ear so we always have to stay the correct side of one another when we're running. Matthew's faster than me but he had a bad day in Amsterdam and I was able to beat him and run 2:38, setting my PB. We'll both be running London again this year. I've got to set the record straight and get it right. I'm heavily invested in trying to move on to the next level. It's exciting to do something at my age where you can still improve.'

M 'I don't think what happened between David and myself is that remarkable. I see people help each other out in races all the time. Maybe because we're club runners (me for Swansea Harriers, David for Chorlton Runners) it struck such a chord with people – there's a perception that club runners are all about the competitive side of running, but we're also very supportive. In races, even in training, we all want each other to do well.'

D 'I feel blessed by what happened. It taught me an awful lot about the running community; rivalries are friendly and everyone wants to improve and have fun doing it. As a newcomer to the sport, I've been blown away by how supportive people are within running. I've not experienced that in any other group. I feel honoured to get caught up in a story that caught people's imagination. It's not really about me, though I think people recognise the determination of what I was trying to do. The story is about Matt's kindness and I still reflect in awe at how he conducted himself that day.'

M 'I have changed career to become a personal trainer. I realised how passionate I am about motivating and helping others, and what happened played a part in that. It's a moment that will live with me forever. We were the ones caught on camera, but it was something greater than us. What people were seeing was sportsmanship.'

David and Matthew are ambassadors for this year's London Marathon theme, 'the spirit of London'. They will take their places on the British Athletics championship start line at the race on April 22.

➔ **handle tough spells to run to your potential. In the lead-up to London, I explored the mental preparation required for optimum race performance. My friend and clubmate, performance psychologist Stuart Holliday, recommended reading *The Chimp Paradox* by his professional supervisor, Steve Peters. As a result,**

I wrote a mental plan as part of a wider race strategy. I now understand that this process to mentally drive for a specific outcome at all costs may have contributed to the critical state I found myself in. I believe I executed this mental race plan rather too well, and in doing so set a course to exceed my physical boundaries.

I wore a heart-rate monitor during the race and when we looked at how this data compared to previous performances, it showed that despite believing I was running comfortably, I might have been overcooking it in the first two thirds of the race compared to Manchester – a retrospective indicator that not all was well.

As the *Sports Medicine* research puts it: 'One potential reason for collapses is that athletes ignore body-related symptoms and concentrate on thoughts not related to the exercise bout in order to reduce the sensations of fatigue and, in this manner, become aware of impending catastrophic system failure too late to respond to it.'

Dr Kipps considered my fixation with a time goal as a key factor. I had resolved to target a sub-2:40 finish nine months before the race, and by doing so had created a hard, locked-in objective. Once that 2:40 time had slipped away (between miles 23 and 24) I was busy making the calculations for securing a sub-2:45 finish, the

PHOTOGRAPHY: LONDON MARATHON (MAIN IMAGE), PA (TOP RIGHT)

London Marathon 'championship' start requirement. That was the goal that I was striving for as I entered Birdcage Walk.'

THE LESSONS

'If the question of how to guarantee a strong finish could be definitively answered, it would remove some of the wonder of marathon racing. I've learned

there isn't a magic recipe. Like many runners, I'm determined to hit my racing goals. However, in future I will not be so governed by chasing locked-in time targets. I'll adapt to what my body and training data is telling me. I must keep the resilience to work through the pain, but also listen to my body to know when not finishing a race is safer. Though I don't

wish to further test my body's limits, the experience left me in wonderment at how amazing the body is, how it knows to respond to physical duress and can override the conscious mind to do what is required to protect itself. On April 22 this year, I plan to make it down The Mall, arms aloft, and mighty proud to be standing unaided.'