

## Parkinson's as a Long Distance Event: A Marathoner's Perspective

By Sharon Wilson, Facilitator of The Greater Winchester Parkinson Support Group

Marathons (26.2 miles) and ultra-marathons (30+) are grueling long distance events. Competitors start out feeling good and looking forward to the journey. Personally, I started out my marathon experience with a little optimism and a lot of fear. When I began participating in the JFK 50 mile hike/run I was instructed to never, never look at the whole event. Instead, the veterans recommended concentrating on 5 to 10 mile sections.

Smart competitors learn to take care of the immediate business by concentrating on pace, consuming fluids and trying to find some enjoyment in the journey. Developing course strategies as you jog along keeps you focused. Refuse to think of the total distance.

May I suggest the Parkinson's journey can be a type of ultra-marathon? The difference is we didn't sign up for this event. As stated, the veteran ultra-competitors concentrate on the immediate section of the trail. It's bad business to predict or look too far ahead. I know this is true because I have dropped out when I allowed myself to think too far down the road. Discouragement and despair will consume you and you will bail out. When I made up my mind to drop out of the event no one could stop me. Have you ever heard people say, "I quit," "that's it" and "I'm out of here"? Quitting marks you as a DNF (did not finish).

Sharon Wilson has completed the John F. Kennedy 50-mile run 10 times. She was diagnosed with Parkinson's in January 2009 and had a hard time accepting it at first. She is a firm believer in the value of exercise for the Parkinson patient.



A DNF is a hundred times worse than all the pain and suffering of the event. Traveling down the Parkinson trail, we all may feel like giving up and giving in to depression. Depression will grip you like a vise and you'll languish. Don't quit fighting no matter how terrible you feel. We have to navigate the course. Yes, like the runner dealing with pain and discomfort, we will resolve to blaze forward and not DNF.

Some competitors have crew members. I was fortunate to have my husband assist me year after year. The event I participated in began in the dark and finished after dark. Like a caregiver, my husband spent hours and hours encouraging and helping me along the course.

The discouraging time in the fifty mile for me was 26 miles -- the horrid place of exit on two previous DNFs. Why? You begin to reason in your mind I'm only half way through, what am I trying to prove? My husband, knowing my particular weak point, did me a great favor. He easily could have met me at mile marker 30, 34 and 38 but he didn't. He announced he'd see me at the dam which was mile marker 84 ½, some 16 miles without his presence. We both realized that sometimes you have to do it on your own. He knew that if I saw him along the way I might have given up (DNF), but he also knew that I would fight to get to the meeting place, and together we would walk and jog the last 8 miles.

Like the veteran runners, let's develop strategies with our crew members and friends to overcome this Parkinson ultra-marathon. Keep your mind in check, concentrate on the present and never ever look too far down the trail. Remember, a DNF is not an option.

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