

## **Even Bill Rodgers Beat Me at Boston 2009**

**Bill Rodgers:**

**Age – 61**

**Boston record – has won the marathon 4 times**

**2009 time – 4:06:49**

**The Beast:**

**Age – 60**

**Boston record – has run the marathon 4 times**

**2009 time – 4:08:50**

**But this marathon was special for reasons other than the fact that I almost beat Boston Billy.**

As everybody in the entire world knows, this is my favorite race, and it took me a long time to first qualify to run it. Some claim that my enthusiasm for the event is infectious, while others point to my determination to qualify for it as somewhat inspiring. My friend John was in that category. He had been a runner for years, but carried a little bit too much weight to be truly competitive and claims he had never even thought about the idea of trying to qualify for the Boston Marathon.....until he met me, and was witness to my eventual triumph after 22 years and 34 attempts. . He joined Weight Watchers and lost 75 pounds; intensified his training; and became focused on the idea of running a Boston Qualifier. I am convinced that his logic was along the lines of “if this old bugger can do it, anybody can”. I paced him to his first two Boston qualifiers before he left me in his dust, and we were set to have another fantastic weekend in Boston 2009 with our wives and other friends. As usual, we would do our best to beat each other’s brains out, but that just made us closer.

And then two months before Patriot’s Day, he died. Despite all his efforts to be as healthy as he possibly could be and to reach unsurpassed fitness levels (he was not only qualified to run Boston for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time, but he was also registered to run his 2<sup>nd</sup> Ironman Triathlon this summer), he could not choose his parents. There had been a history of early mortality in his family, and he died suddenly of some sort of heart attack. Our running club mourned along with his family and friends, and grieved that this amazing person with his impish sense of humor would no longer be with us.

Approximately a week after he died, Diane asked me if I would carry his photo with me on the trek from Hopkinton to Boston. That brought tears to my eyes, but of course I immediately responded that I couldn’t think of anything that I’d be more honored to do.

My preparation for Boston 2009 was rather unorthodox, at least for me. Having bought a winter retreat in South Carolina, I spent more time golfing than I did running. Yes; I put in the miles, but my workouts lacked the intensity that is paramount in order to do a respectable job at the marathon distance. Worse yet; I did zero hill training – up or down. I might have gotten away with that for most marathons – but not the Boston Frickin’ Marathon, with its ominous and never-ending hills. I got back to NJ a couple of weeks before Boston, and ran a weekend of hills with old friends. My legs did not appreciate that, asking what the heck was going on. Almost immediately, and perhaps because of sudden hillwork after being dormant for 6 months, my old neuroma problem in my left foot announced itself. But this time it was worse than it had ever been, and no amount of icing or analgesics made it any better. The week before Boston, I developed a very painful sinus infection that prevented me from having a decent night’s sleep all week. I subsisted on ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and aspirin.

An emergency visit to the dentist confirmed that it was sinus, not dental-related. Antibiotics were suggested, but I wasn't going to risk that just before a marathon.

Diane called me early that week to confirm that everything was still a "go" and that I was ready. Naturally; I lied and said that everything was fine. I had printed John's Philly BQ photo (for Boston 2009) on racing bib cloth and was going to pin it to my singlet. It read "In Memory of John Fischer, with the dates of his birth and death", and at the bottom, the inscription was "Boston Marathoner".

I knew this was going to be painful, as I was unable to even walk without the neuroma pain driving me crazy. Believe it or not – under normal circumstances, I might even have bailed out of the Boston Marathon, but I really never even considered it because of John. I had to run, and I absolutely had to finish. I don't know how I could have faced Diane otherwise.

So I did.

I toughed it out for as long as I could; and then when the pain was unbearable, I kept running. Since it made no difference pain-wise what pace I was running, I just started out running the even-effort pace that the Boston Marathon course dictates. That meant I went through mile 1 in 8:48 because of the crowds; then an 8:11 with the mile 2 downhill; followed by 8:16; and then 8:44 on the small uphill on mile 4. Anyone watching my 5K splits on-line would just assume I was running my normal race. And I kept that up for 13 miles. Granted; this year I took more advantage of the Wellesley Scream Tunnel than I ever have in the past, but I felt like I needed that for what was sure to come. And it did. My legs started protesting on mile 14 and I slowed to a 9:01. Mile 15 was 9:16 and despite the screaming downhill of mile 16, my pace slowed even more – to a 9:17. I ran up the first of the Newton Hills, and told my wife that I was toast, that my legs were killing me, and it would be very difficult to even break 4 hours. She was puzzled, because I was there within 30 seconds of my predicted time, which would have projected to a sub 3:50 finish easily. But I knew what she didn't.

I never ran a sub 10:00 minute mile after that. Granted; the mile splits from 17-26 are remarkably consistent; they just aren't fast. I have never, ever been in so much pain and had my legs hurt during and after a marathon like they did on this day. Although I kept meeting many friends along the course and ran with them for varying distances, I was by myself. (not quite true; John was with me, and he was counting on me). To be honest; inevitably I simply couldn't hold the pace and I lost contact with people I met. Damn; I wanted to stop running and stop the pain. But I knew that a dnf was not an option. Not on this day. Somewhere in the last few miles when I was suffering the worst, a spectator shouted out that "it's a great day to be alive". For the second time in two months, I cried. And then put one foot in front of the other and kept praying that the damn Citgo sign would come soon. My right leg felt like it was starting to cramp with about two miles to go, and I was petrified that I would be forced to stop. No way Jose. I have to finish.

There wasn't a whole lot of elation as I made the right turn on Hereford and left on Boylston. It was much more a feeling that relief was on its way if I could just hold it together for another few yards. I sincerely believe that I would not have been able to physically make it if I didn't have John with me spiritually. But he was, and I did. This one's for you, buddy. I know you were watching me, and most probably, racing me virtually from your perch on high.

A session with my massage therapist two days after the marathon confirmed that the neuroma created all kinds of changes to my normal running gait, and none of them were good. Apparently; I favored the right leg so much that I actually drove the hip upwards, and my right leg is temporarily shorter than my left (the one with the neuroma). My right shin and quad were unbelievably painful while she was working on them. Apparently, this was from unconsciously having the right leg do the bulk of the

work. I bloodied new shoes and socks due to ghastly blisters. I guess the left one was because the neuroma pad affected the normal fit. The right was simply because of the unorthodox form and undue workload on that “good” foot.

This was my 51<sup>st</sup> marathon, and I think I can safely say that this was by far the most painful both during and after. Clearly; the heat of Boston 2004 made for just as difficult a run, but I suffered more during this one because of my physical condition. It’s going to take time for me to get past this race. And IF I do go back to Boston – regardless of the unfortunate timing of the neuroma and sinus problems – I definitely have got to do the prerequisite hillwork. No good enough to run in the South Carolina FLAT Low Country if you expect to survive the Newton Hills. You can’t cheat the marathon.

The weekend wasn’t a total loss. There were so many great times with good friends. And I’ve learned not to take that kind of thing for granted. Live life and savor it while you can.

“It’s not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what’s required”. – Winston Churchill