

Staying the Course

Black Marathoners Share Lessons from the Race

By Nicole Allen

DALLAS RESIDENT ANTHONY

“Tony” Reed was a graduate student at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Tex., when he observed his first marathon up close and personal. There had been an ice storm, but he needed to get to the library. While en route to the library a group of people ran by him. “I thought they were complete idiots running in the ice,” recalls Reed. But that was then – before his first 26.2 miler.

Reed soon found out those people were running The Cowtown Marathon,

which later, in 1982, became his first marathon. And next year, he plans to take 500 Black marathoners with him to run The Cowtown – for what will mark his 100th marathon.

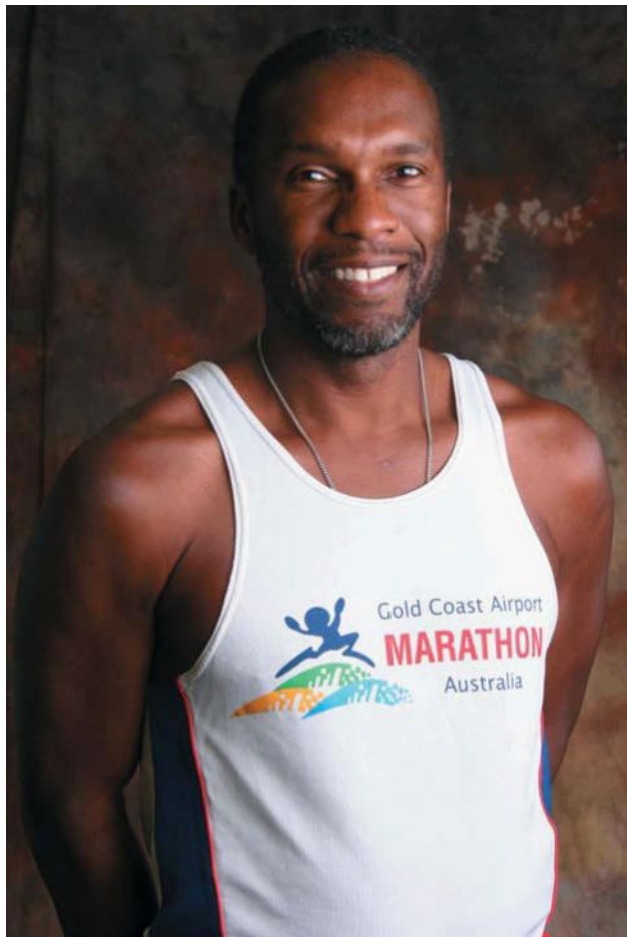
With more than 90 marathons under his belt, Reed, 52, has battled 40 mph winds and extreme temperatures to stay the course. Avoiding wild animals and trekking up a glacier were challenges that Reed faced in Antarctica to become the first Black person ever to run a marathon on all seven continents. “My objective was simply to keep moving so I wouldn’t freeze to death,” recalls Reed.

A bona fide road-warrior, Reed also is no stranger to the board room’s battleground. He is a certified public accountant (CPA), holds an MBA, and he has more than 30 years of experience in information technology and accounting. He also is a certified project management professional and a certified supply chain management professional.

When not tracking across the globe, Reed spends some of his time managing his own technology-oriented CPA firm, also named Reed. He also frequently speaks at engagements and conducts motivational seminars. Aside from writing industry papers, Reed has authored two books, *Running Shoes Are Cheaper than Insulin: Marathon Adventures on All Seven Continents* and *The Achievement Equation: Your Formula for Success*.

Along his race to corporate America, which includes notable past positions such as Information Technology Director at Texas Instruments and Vice President of Information Technology at Motel 6, Reed has experienced his fair share of blisters. Being kicked out of college the first time around, for partying too much,

Tony Reed



could have been the pebble in his shoe that knocked him off course – but it wasn't. "I remember getting a copy of my transcript just to check and make sure my grades were as bad as they said they were," says Reed. "And I realized that the only name on the transcript was my name. I had to accept responsibility for what I did, and I had to stop blaming instructors... stop blaming the system."

As a child growing up in St. Louis, Reed was overweight and diagnosed with increased glucose levels. In high school, when sports participation was a curriculum requirement, Reed discovered cross country running. It was intrinsically challenging but made more difficult by local hecklers who yelled and threw things out car windows as he ran. "That was happening because I was Black," says Reed who currently carries about 10 percent body fat. "I was being called the 'N' word and everything else."

These early experiences on the trail are not easily forgotten, and even today you won't find Reed running in a haze with an MP3 player blaring. Making sure that he is aware of his surroundings, Reed says he prefers to listen to the natural sounds around him. "I actually think a lot while I'm running," says Reed. "I've actually come up with some very creative ideas while running. For example, the logo for the National Black Marathoners' Association literally came to me during one of my runs."

NATIONAL BLACK MARATHONS' ASSOCIATION

Founded in 2004, the National Black Marathoners' Association (NBMA) is the brain-child of co-founders Reed and Charlotte Simmons-Foster, 45, based in the Atlanta metro area. Simmons-Foster, also an IT professional, first heard Reed speak at a convention in 2001. When Reed announced he planned to run 50 marathons by the time he reached age 50, she knew she would keep in contact with him. An avid member of the South

Fulton Running Partners, an Atlanta area running group, Simmons-Foster still felt the desire for a Black runner's organization that specifically supported distance running. Very fittingly, the logo of the NBMA is a symbolic race number decorated with the motto "Free to Run" and the number "1865" representing the year slavery was abolished.

One mission of the NBMA is to encourage Black Americans to pursue healthy lifestyles through long-distance running and walking. And although members pay no dues, the NBMA fundraises to provide scholarships to deserving high school distance runners. But



Running the 2006 Great Wall of China Marathon.

perhaps, the objective closest to many a Black marathoner's heart is to increase the number of people of color on the course. All too often, Reed says he is the only one, or perhaps one of few Blacks, at the starting line. So another mission of the NBMA is to serve as a vehicle for Black American distance runners to meet in mass at a single marathon.

Simmons-Foster, who also serves as Race Selection Director for the NBMA, chooses approximately three marathons per year for group participation. To support the diverse range of experiences reflected in its membership, Simmons-Foster typically selects marathon events, on alternating coasts, which offer at least the option of a half-marathon.

With more than 12 marathons under her belt, it was the desire to ward off a family history of diabetes that got Simmons-Foster's feet moving. But, it's her love of the sport that keeps her feet moving. "I'm a social runner," says

Simmons-Foster, who would rather chat with other runners along the course than listen to her MP3 player while training. "[Talking] takes your mind off the fact that you're running, and it helps you to get to the finish line a lot easier."

In distance running, Reed says it is a good rule of thumb to run at a pace where you can have a conversation with someone. "When you're running, especially distances, you tend to let your guard down," he says. "You can have a conversation with a total stranger about personal problem issues in your life and really bounce ideas off of them."

Compared to Simmons-Foster and Reed, Jackquelyn Strickland, 41, is a neophyte in the marathon world. A corporate attorney in Cleveland and a NBMA board member, Strickland has run two marathons. Before Reed became her running mentor, Strickland says her longest run was about three miles. Reed helped her develop a monthly training program. "Physically it was miserable," says Strickland about the last six miles of her first marathon. "As I crossed that finish line, I knew that the sky was the limit for me. I could do anything I wanted to do."

Initially running to lose weight, Strickland now says her motivation is much more complex. "There are so many benefits – mental, physical and spiritual – that go along with running," she says. "It just makes life that much sweeter."

Newcomers can now benefit from other runners' practical experiences. But for Reed, who started his marathon career in the early 1980s, many of those experiences had to be learned firsthand. "I trained and went through a lot of things by trial and error," says Reed. In the early years, before Gatorade was popular, Reed says he experimented with everything – from what types of beverages to carry during a marathon, to when to drink and how much to drink. Even today, Reed often carries his own beverage during the first half of a marathon to avoid the sometimes bottleneck traffic at drink stations.

The conveniences of modern clothing, such as Lycra tights, were also not available when Reed first began marathon training. Reed says most men were generally forced to run in sweat pants. But he adds, "Some men were even running marathons in lady's panty hose just to keep warm."

Experience has also taught Reed that currency is king in any country, so he never runs a marathon without carrying cash. There have been countless times in which he's had to detour from the race course, and into a 7-Eleven, to

buy a beverage because of unreliable drink stations. Once he ran a marathon in Denmark in which the only available washroom facilities were pay-stations at train depots.

MEMORIES OF A LIFETIME

To date, Reed considers his most memorable marathon the 2007 Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon in which he ran the first nine miles with a NBMA member in her 70s. "It's not too late to start," assures Reed. What also made the marathon notable were the approximate 150 NBMA

members there. "For me to see that many black marathoners, all wearing the same color [shirt], was breath-taking."

No matter how experienced a runner is, keeping on track at the end of the race is a mind game. "I actually think about what I'm going to be eating when I cross the finish line," says Reed, who doesn't follow a special marathon diet but especially loves running locations with White Castles since the restaurant chain is unavailable in Dallas.

"When it gets tough," says Simmons-Foster, "usually around three miles [left] to finish, I just always remind myself, 'No. 1 – you've done it before. Put one foot in front of the other.'" And if all else fails, appeal to your own vanity to stay in the race. "Smile for the camera," laughs Simmons-Foster. "It's all about the finish photo. Nobody knows what it was like on the course, but the picture has to look good."

In Training

Training for your own 26.2 miler? Want to do a half-marathon? Here are some tips to help you stay the course:

1. Improve your foot fortitude.

Running a marathon is a test of cardiac endurance, but all the strength in the world is pointless if you're not used to pounding on your feet for at least 2 1/2 to 3 hours. If you're a beginner, do whatever you have to do to get used to walking, jogging and running for the duration.

2. Go to work with the right tools.

Would you go bowling without steel-toed shoes? Then make sure you train for a marathon with the proper footwear. If you don't, it could cost you a toenail – literally. Trial and error will reveal what works for you, but you may consider purchasing one shoe size larger than normal to accommodate swelling feet.

3. Don't go the distance – at least not at first.

If you've set your sights on completing your first long-distance challenge, it can be tempting to log too many miles up front. Never increase your weekly mileage by more than 10 percent. And initially don't extend a long run by more than one mile.

4. Take a run down easy street.

Although you will gradually increase your weekly mileage, it is periodically okay to have weeks where you intentionally cut down your mileage. Don't get upset if you miss a run. It's okay to take 'off' days, because your body needs time to recover.

5. You may need to leave South Beach.

Were you on the low-carb kick? Low-carbohydrate, high-protein eating plans like the South Beach diet serve their purpose, but marathon training will require a certain amount of carbohydrate intake. Although protein and iron intake will help you stay the course, now is not the time to swear off the carbs completely.

6. A marathon is a test of endurance AND strength.

Your goal may be to run, but to run efficiently consider strengthening your core muscle groups. The body is a composite of interlocking muscle groups, so improving abdominal, back and shoulder strength will pay dividends on race day.

Visit www.runnersworld.com for more tips and information. –Nicole Allen

MBA LESSONS SHARED ON THE COURSE

Through the years, Reed has found that many lessons learned along the race course don't differ much from corporate America's hills and valleys. "I really don't worry about what the weather is going to be like [during a race]...because I can't control it," says Reed. "And that's like a lot of situations I've encountered managing multi-million dollar projects. There are some things that you can't control – that you just don't worry about. The only thing you can control is yourself."

Reed concludes and suggests to maintain self-control and shape your destiny it's important to exercise your body as much as your mind. "Just because a person has an MBA doesn't mean that they're going to get hired," he says. "[Potential employers] may not tell them, 'we're not going to hire you, because you're overweight and out of shape.' But it does happen."

Tony Reed can be reached at www.AchievementEquation.com. Visit www.BlackMarathoners.org for NBMA updates.

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