

# **THE AGELESS ATHLETE**

**BY MARTIN PARNELL AND MALC KENT**

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# Prologue

“Age is no barrier. It’s a limitation you put on your mind.”

—JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE, US Olympic gold medallist

## 4 a.m., Sunday, December 2, 2018

I’m awake waiting for the clock to come around to 4 a.m. The Holiday Inn Express in Sacramento is quiet but soon the marathoners will be switching the coffee makers on for their first cup of java of the day. Finally the alarm goes off. I have an hour before the bus leaves at 5 a.m. On goes the coffee and I pour my instant oats into a cup. I bought a couple of bananas from the hotel shop the day before. I mentioned to the shop assistant that if she had bought a bunch of bananas she could sell them at \$5 each to the runners.

Breakfast is ready and Malc comes to the room. It’s time to go over the race strategy. We realized a while ago that a 3:22 marathon was probably out of the question unless a miracle happened. Due to an injury in August my training had been severely curtailed. Our hope now is for a 3:40 marathon, and with that goal in mind the plan is to stick with the 3:40 race pacer. I finish the oatmeal, say goodbye to Malc and head out for the bus. It’s dark and cool and there’s a group of runners waiting at the bus stop. A bus arrives and we all climb on. The route is a point to point so we head out to Folsom Dam and the start line. There is little conversation in the bus. The runners are preparing for what’s ahead.

We arrive at Folsom at 6 a.m. and the race starts at 7 a.m. The sun is coming up and it’s a cool but dry day. As I’m getting off I see Malc out of the window. He’s driven up with Dominique and Phil, the film crew from Fireweed Creative, who are making a documentary on “The Ageless Athlete.” Four months before they had heard about my challenge, to try and beat my personal bests in the 5K, 10K, half marathon and full marathon, set in 2003 at the age of 47. Now, 15 years later at the age of 62, I’m trying to turn back the running clock.

Malc wants me to do my race warm-ups. I head along a path with just the street lights for guidance. Ten minutes out, 10 minutes back. Then it’s 4 × 50 m strides to stretch the legs out. Five minutes to the start. I say my goodbyes to Malc, Dom and Phil and walk into the starting chute. Runners are all around me and the atmosphere is palpable. I reflect on my year of training and injuries. Can a person really turn back time? Is age just a number or should we go quietly into the night? If there’s one thing I’ve learnt it’s that the body can do far more than we think. We shouldn’t let society pigeonhole us into what we can and can’t do in our 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond. It’s up to us to challenge these preconceptions.

Then I’m jolted out of my thoughts. The starter calls out... 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Enough of these thoughts, there’s a marathon to run.

## Up and Running

“Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

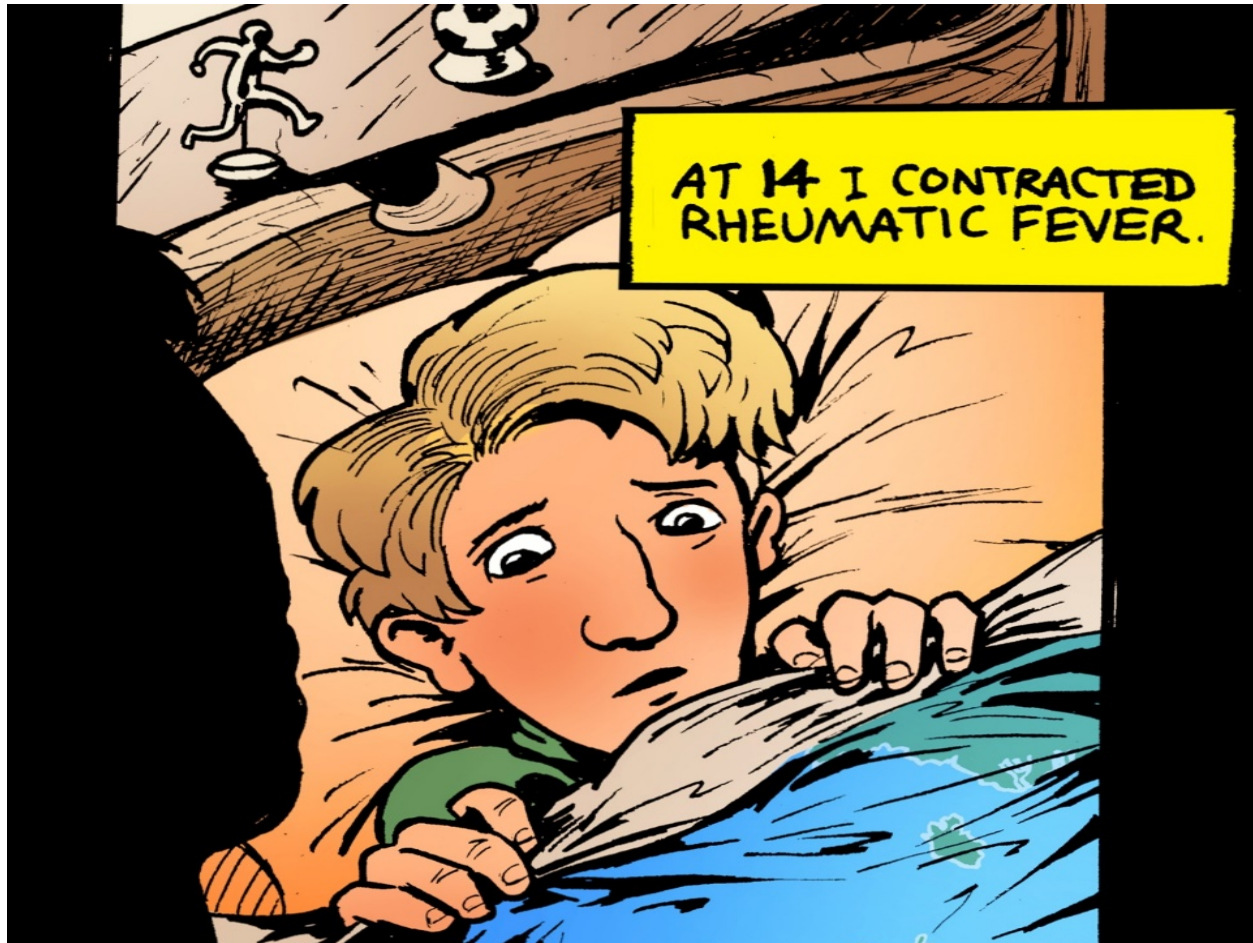
—MARK TWAIN, American writer

Looking back at my early athletic endeavours is not a pretty sight. As a child I was a “Big Boy,” and in simple terms that meant that I was generally selected last for any school football (soccer), cricket or rugby teams. The good news was that this didn’t seem to bother my parents. They weren’t that interested in developing the next football superstar. Mum and Dad were both all-round sports people and they instilled in their six kids the love of the game. Most evenings, brothers Peter, Andrew and I would be in the garden having a “Kick-about.” We made our own nets out of metal tubing and netting and would only come in when it got dark and Mum yelled that it was supertime.



When I was 14 an event happened that changed my life. One morning I told Mum that I had a sore throat. She got the doctor in and he diagnosed rheumatic fever. I looked up rheumatic fever and learned that *“rheumatic fever can occur after a throat infection from a bacteria called group A streptococcus. Group A streptococcus infections of the throat cause strep throat or, less commonly, scarlet fever. Inflammation caused by rheumatic fever can last a few weeks to several months. In some cases, the*

*inflammation causes long-term complications. Rheumatic fever can cause permanent damage to the heart (rheumatic heart disease). It usually occurs 10 to 20 years after the original illness, but severe cases of rheumatic fever can cause damage to the heart valves while your child still has symptoms.” Well, that wasn’t what I wanted to hear.*



I was laid up in bed for eight weeks over the summer and went back to school in the fall. Exercise was allowed and I slowly got going again. It took me a year to fully recover, just in time for the school sports day, and I really wanted to run the one-mile race. The sports teacher was hesitant but gave me the green light. The route was four loops around the running track and I decided to start off slowly and pace myself. I felt good for two loops, then on the third loop I heard the teacher yelling at me to “Get off the track.” I came off before the final loop and the teacher said that I was beet red and he was worried that I would keel over. As I walked back to the change room I thought, “Well, that’s the end of my running career.”



Another activity that I participated in during the fall of that year was the “Ten Tors” event. Teams of six from all over England arrived at Oakhampton in Devon to tackle an endurance challenge. The objective was to hike from one “Tor” to another using a compass until all ten tors had been scaled. There were two events, a 35-mile and a 45-mile trek. In both cases the team had to spend a night camping before they could finish the challenge.

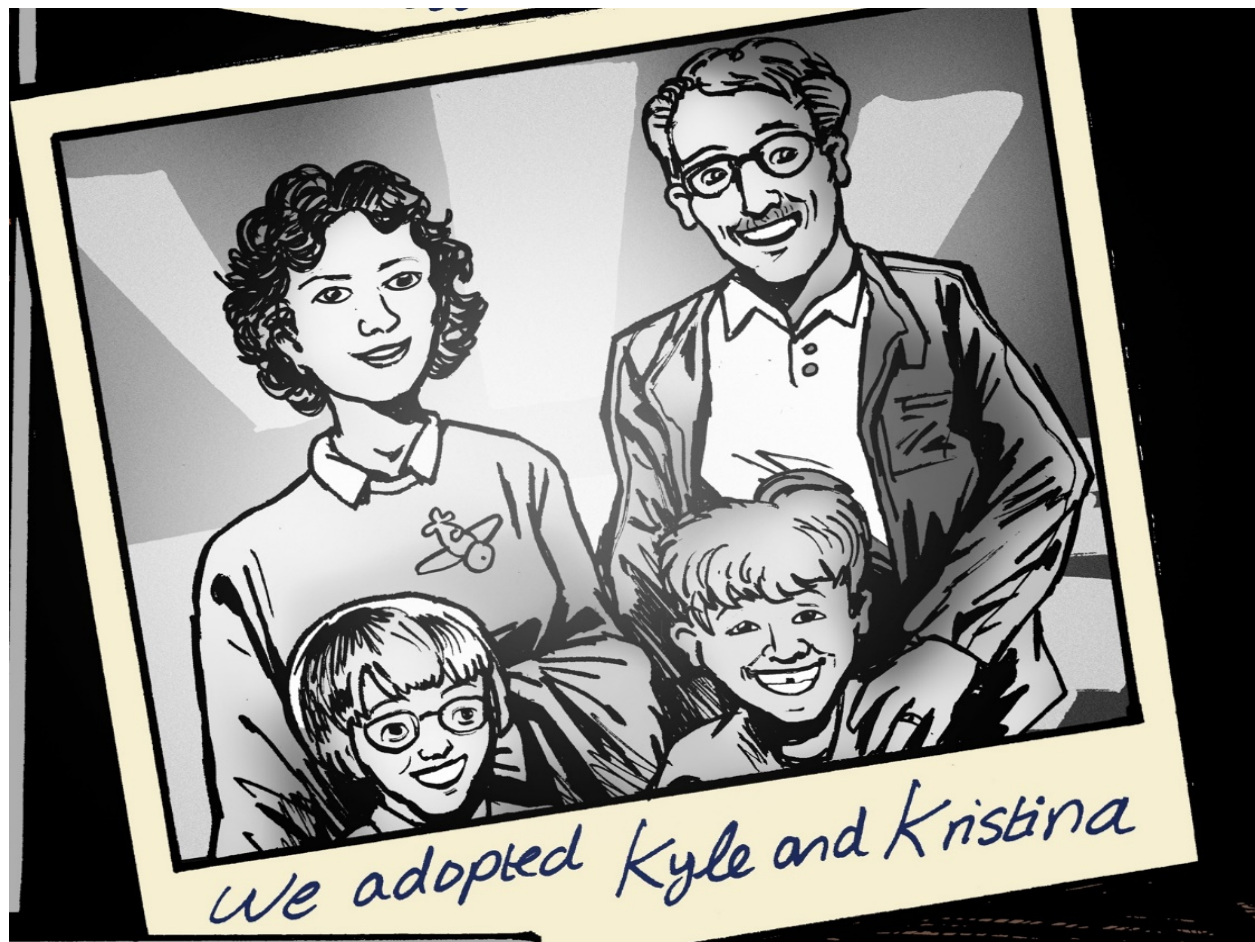
Over a two-month period I headed out every Saturday and with my team hiked all over the moors. The best part was the cold sausage sandwiches Mum had made me for lunch. I was part of the Newton Abbot Grammar School team and we were all pumped as we waited with hundreds of other teams at the start. We were lucky that year, as the weather was clear and warm and we made good time as we traversed the trails. We finished strong and all reached our “Ten Tors” medal.

Things didn’t go as well the following year. This time the team tackled the 45-mile event. At the start line the weather was overcast and black clouds had started to gather. Dartmoor is known for sudden changes in weather and you can be in big trouble if you’re caught on the moors. This is one of the reasons the maximum security Dartmoor Prison is located in this part of the country.

Within an hour of the start the rain began and mist rolled in. We trudged on and using our compass managed to find five of the Tors. As we headed towards the sixth Tor we were enveloped by a complete whiteout and couldn’t see ten feet in front of us. Then disaster struck. We were crossing a small river when one of our team slipped and cracked his hip. He tried to walk it off but it was no good. We found

an aid station marked on the map and made our way to safety. Arriving at the station I couldn't believe what I saw. The place was filled with teams looking for help. The weather was so bad that 80 per cent of the teams didn't make the finish, and that included us. It had been an incredible experience and one I would remember many years in the future.

Time moved on, and at the end of 1977 I received my BSc in Mining Engineering at the Camborne School of Mines. From there it was off to a new land and new life in Canada, and my first full-time job at the Sullivan Mine in Kimberley, British Columbia. My mining career took me to the Con Mine in Yellowknife, NWT, where I met my wife Wendy. In 1986 we moved to Sudbury, Ontario, where I worked for Falconbridge and Wendy was a teacher with the Sudbury Catholic School Board. Three years later we adopted a brother and sister, Kyle, age 4, and Kristina, age 2. Life was pretty settled for us with Wendy and I working and the kids going to school. My athletic endeavours took a back seat to family life. I was a "Bit-of" an athlete – I played a bit of tennis and a bit of squash – but I am proud that my 20 years of golf had yielded a 20 handicap. My objective going forward was to try and keep my handicap below the number of years I had played golf.



In June of 2001 my world was turned upside down. Wendy was diagnosed with cancer of the liver and she passed away on December 11. I carried on as best I could. I continued working and looking after Kyle and Kristina. I had many bad days and lonely nights, and I felt like I was living in a twilight zone. In mid-December 2002 I received a call from my brother Peter. He was living in Cochrane, Alberta, and after some small talk he came to the point. He wanted to challenge me to a marathon, and without hesitation

I said yes. It was only after I put the phone down that I realized what I had done. I had committed to running 42.2 km – and I didn't run.



That night I tried a 1 km out and 1 km back. It was a snowy and wet Sudbury night. Finishing the run, I was frozen to the bone and my canvas shoes were soaked and I was dejected. I had completed just 2 km – how on earth was I going to run a marathon? What I needed was a plan. Over the next six months I joined the Sudbury Rocks Running Club and competed in 5-km, 10-km and half marathon events and on July 6, I was at the start of the 2003 Calgary Marathon. Next to me was my brother Peter and my other brother Andrew who had flown in from England. The race did not start off well. After 2 km I stepped into a pothole and did a face plant. Brushing myself off, I continued and finished in 3:50:22, ahead of Peter but behind Andrew. However, I felt like a winner – my marathon career had started.



My running mentor, Vince Perdue from the Sudbury Rocks Running Club, figured I had a shot at qualifying for the Boston Marathon, so for three months I did intervals, hill repeats and tempo sessions. On October 19, I was at the start of the Toronto International Marathon, and I really wanted to see what I could do. The gun went off and Sudbury Rocks Stephanie paced me for the first half. I was feeling good and knew I had a shot at the 3:25:00 qualifying time. With 1 km remaining I had eight minutes spare and a final push got me in at 3:22:44. Qualified with 2:16 to spare!

It had been a very rough two years. I had been in many dark places since Wendy passed away but qualifying for Boston brought me joy that I hadn't felt for a long time.

After the Toronto International Marathon my life moved on. I met Sue in England at a New Year's Eve party and we started a long distance relationship that took us to Canada, England and Denmark. I quit my job in the mining industry and moved to Cochrane. A time of new beginnings, and on April 19, I ran the 2004 Boston Marathon. It was the start of another love affair. Back in Cochrane I joined the Red Rock Running and Tri club. I was loving the running but I heard members of the club talking about this sport called Triathlon: swim, bike, run. Time to try something new.

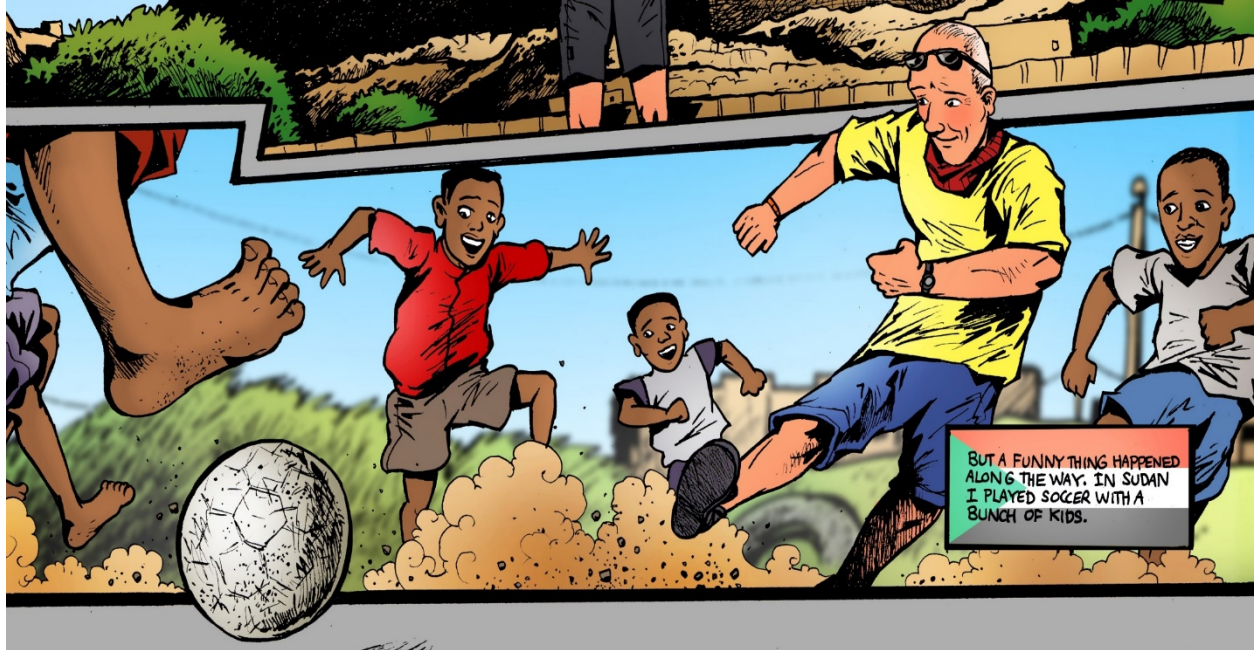
I did my first triathlon in May 2004 and it was called "Try This Triathlon." It was a 750-m swim, 10-km bike and 5-km run. I was pretty amazed that I finished it as I had only started swimming two months prior. During the rest of the year I tackled the Arbour Lake Olympic Triathlon (1.5-km swim, 40-km bike, 10-km run) and the Great White North Half Ironman Triathlon (2-km swim, 90-km bike and a half marathon). I was really enjoying pushing myself physically, something I hadn't done before.



As 2004 came to an end I was preparing myself for a challenge that would push me to my limits. I was looking for an adventure and I found it with the Tour d'Afrique. A year prior I had read in the *Sudbury Star* about the fastest crossing of Africa, from Cairo to Cape Town, by a group of cyclists. The write-up on the trip stated: *"Our trans-continental journey and flagship expedition crossing Africa from north to south, covering almost 11,000 km in four months. A test of mind, body, and bicycle. Traveling through 10 countries in all, you will cycle along the Nile past ancient temples, through the Sudanese desert, and up and down the biblical landscapes of Ethiopia's rugged Simien Mountains. After crossing the Equator in Kenya, you will pedal past legendary Mount Kilimanjaro, to Lake Malawi, Victoria Falls, and along the edges of the magnificent Kalahari and Namib deserts, en route to the finish of your epic journey in beautiful Cape Town, South Africa."*



On the morning January 15, I was at the Pyramids outside of Cairo, Egypt, with 30 international riders, ready to start my next adventure. Over the next four months we cycled six days a week, an average of 120 km a day. The sights along the way were amazing, but the highlight was playing sports with children: soccer with a group of kids on a sand pitch in Wadi Halfa, in the Sudan; table tennis with a 12-year-old boy in a village in Ethiopia; and a throng of children cheering us on and running with boys and girls in Kenya and Tanzania. This trip showed me that I could take on an endurance challenge and had the mental attitude to see it to the end.



I returned to England from Cape Town and spent time with Sue. Before leaving for Africa I had proposed to Sue and she had accepted. I returned to Canada and we planned that Sue would follow me over in August. However, as I was leaving she set me a task upon my return to Cochrane: buy a house.