

## **Chapter 3**

### **Quests for Kids (Part 1 of 2)**

“Old age is like a plane flying through a storm. Once you’re aboard, there’s nothing you can do.”

—GOLDA MEIR, Prime Minister of Israel

In early February 2009, after returning from another 30 km around Middle Lake, I checked my email and found a message from an old friend, Michael. He and I had worked together at the Con gold mine in Yellowknife back in the early 1980s and we had stayed in touch. He wrote to let me know that Tom – my old boss (and a great guy) at the Sullivan Mine in Kimberley – was in Calgary, and passed along his phone number, suggesting that I drop him a line.

I hadn’t thought about Tom in a long time and I was keen to get back in touch. Later that evening, I called Tom and he asked me over to dinner the next night. The moment I walked in the door I could tell Tom had a plan. We talked for a while about our common interest in running and skiing. Then he sat me down and told me about Right To Play. I had already heard a little bit about the organization.

I remembered when speed skater and cyclist Clara Hughes donated \$10,000 to RTP in 2006. I remember thinking Clara must have felt pretty strongly about RTP to take this action. She did. She was behind Right To Play 100 per cent and has since talked a lot about RTP’s ability to make change happen by helping children in dire circumstances build leadership and peacemaking skills, learn about healthy habits and gain self-confidence, all through games and sport.

As I listened to Tom talk about RTP with the enthusiasm I had seen him display so many times before, I wondered what he was getting at. While we were eating dinner, Tom made a statement I wouldn’t soon forget: “Their idea isn’t to feed a bunch of bellies – that doesn’t solve anything. Right To Play is in 20-some different countries, and they’ve designated coaches to teach about the importance of inclusiveness. They’ve also implemented programs for kids to play while learning to respect one another, so they can grow up and turn into future leaders as well.”



Slowly he came around to his point. Tom wanted to know if I would be interested in doing something to raise funds for RTP, run some races, get some donations. I must admit I was drawn to his suggestion right away. There was something about RTP's mandate that captured me. I suppose I didn't know it at that point, but the idea of play – in my case running, biking, racing – allowing a person to grow and change and become stronger is as much a part of my story as it is RTP's.

And my cycling trip from Cairo to the Cape had shown me the power of sport in children's lives; from the soccer mania to the roadside table tennis, the kids were keen to play. What would happen if an organization embraced playfulness and made it part of a program that helped kids help themselves and their communities? Although Tom's spiel already had me hooked, I took a couple of days to think about it and to read more about RTP. I decided to do some research. Right To Play's history spoke for itself.

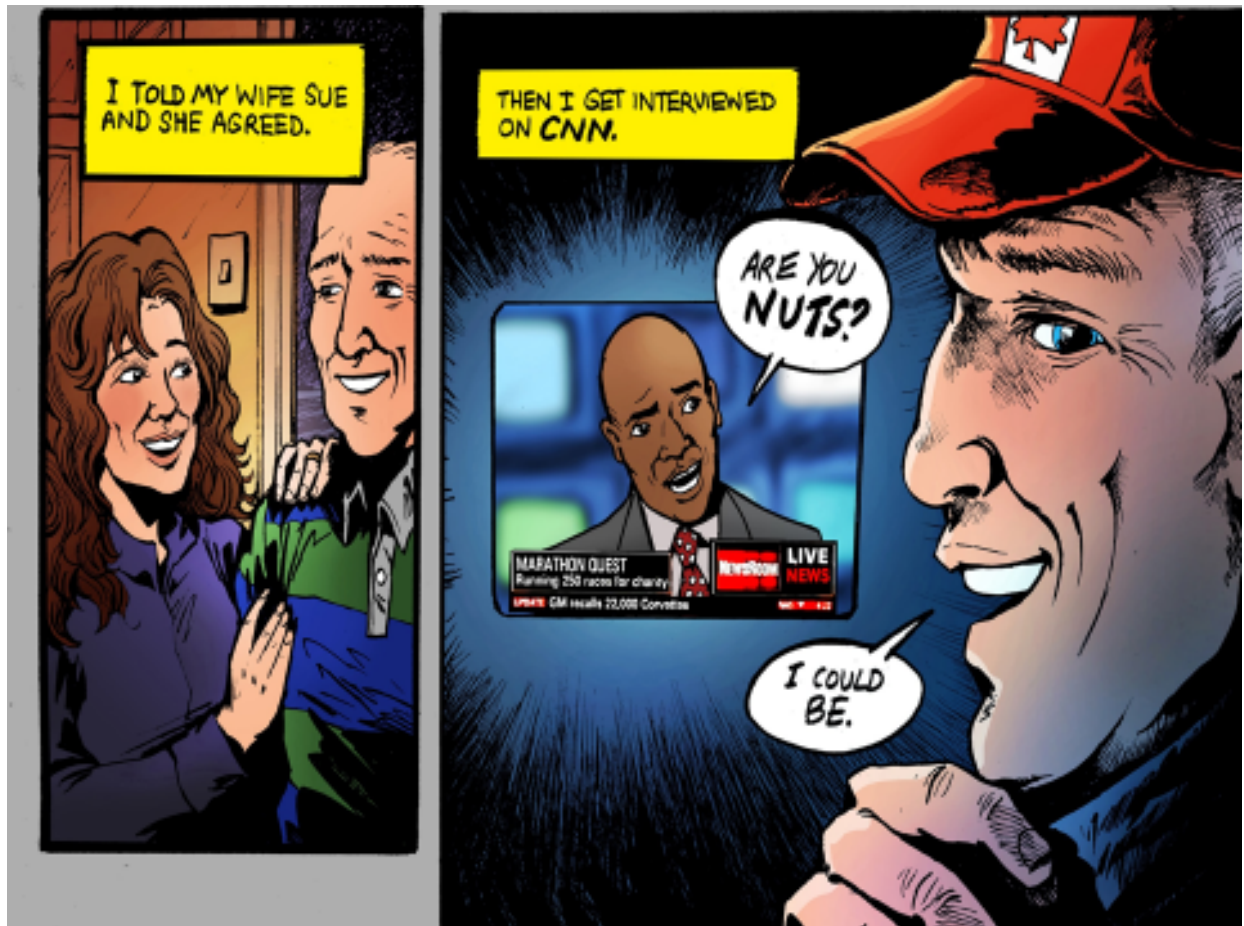
I was really taken by the organization's approach, and its motto: "Look after yourself, look after one another." By training local coaches to run its programs, RTP encourages a long-term presence of sport and play programming in communities. For example, in 2009 I found out that RTP was establishing an initiative in Benin by working with the nation's Ministry of Education and establishing programs at 15 different sites in the country.

But Benin was just the tip of the iceberg: RTP operated 48 projects in 23 countries in 2009. I was impressed. At the end of the week, I called Tom to tell him I was in. We spent February and March planning how we would organize ourselves. We contacted Robert Witchel, Canadian national director of RTP, and let him know what we were thinking about. First we set a fundraising target: \$10,000, à la Clara

Hughes! We also decided to encourage friends and family to join us in our quest. We called ourselves Kids-U-Can and, with the help of our friend Jeffrey, set up a website. Our first event would be the Vancouver Half Marathon, scheduled for early May.



One evening in late June, after my third marathon of the week, I came home and told Sue that I had an idea and wanted to run 365 marathons in 2010 as a fundraiser for Right To Play. She looked at me, paused and told me to go see my doctor. Somehow, I knew going to see Dr. Bill Hanlon wouldn't throw a wrench into my plans. Bill had climbed the seven highest peaks on the seven continents, including Mount Everest, and he later skied to the South Pole. Instead of my receiving a warning or a flat-out no from Dr. Hanlon, we had a good chat and came up with the very sensible idea of running five marathons a week, or 262 in total, instead. This way, I would have two recovery days per week, allowing me room to breathe. In the end, we dropped the total marathons down to 250, which allowed me 12 spare days for unforeseen events.



At 8:30 a.m. on January 1, 2010, Sue and I left the house. Before starting the 15-minute, 1-km walk north to Highway 1A, Sue took the first of what would become known as the "First Light" pictures. Every day she would take a photo of me standing next to the tree outside our house. Over the course of the year, they showed the changes in the seasons and how I had dressed for the varying weather conditions. As we set off, a full moon hovered over the mountains and the sun was coming up. It was  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , a bit warmer than predicted. I had suited up in my full winter running gear for Marathon 001, but as we made our way to the start, the fluid in my CamelBak was already starting to freeze.

When we arrived at Highway 1A and Horse Creek Road, a group of friends from the Cochrane Red Rock Running & Tri Club were there waiting for me. They had decided to run the first marathon with me, and I was pleased to see that the temperature hadn't stopped them. Mayor Truper McBride and some other town councillors were also there, as were news reporters from the Cochrane *Times* and *Eagle* and crews from CTV and CBC.



Mayor McBride said a few words and Sue took a bunch a photos. In one of them, my five running mates and I smiled madly for the camera. My friends were smiling because they had one marathon to run and were feeling excited at the start line. I was smiling because that is what you do when someone says, “Say cheese!” Even now, when I look at that photo, I remember what I was really thinking: “What the hell am I doing?”

Over the next year I ran 250 marathons covering 10,550 km. A total of seven were official races, including Boston, Vancouver, Red Deer, Calgary, Regina, Victoria (Boston Qualifier) and Las Vegas. The rest were on pathways in Cochrane and Calgary, other than when I would run at a school.

I would start with a school assembly with the students, telling them about Right To Play. Then I’d head out and run 100 times around their sports field. During the first two loops the kids would join me, then they would go into classes and I would go round and round. At lunchtime they would come out and join me for two more loops. They’d feed me apples, carrots and Snickers bars. I was like their “Pet for the Day.”



Then they'd go back into class. At the end of the day they would join me for the final two loops. When we finished the 100 loops we gave each other high-fives and the students gave me "loonies" and "toonies" from their pocket money so they could help the "other kids." In total I ran at 60 schools with over 12,000 students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Even if I had the worst week of running marathons, my spirits were lifted every time I ran with the kids.



As we approached the end of 2010, Sue had talked about how I might feel when Marathon Quest 250 came to an end. Neither of us was sure how finishing might affect my body, and my mind too. She suggested I give myself a goal: sign up for a future race, give myself something to aim for. At that point in the year, many people had already begun asking me what I was going to do in 2011. I decided to book myself in for two other events in 2011: the Comrades ultramarathon on May 29 in South Africa, and my yearly appointment on September 14 with my urologist, Dr. Baverstock. Needless to say, I was more excited about Comrades than Dr. Baverstock.

One of my running friends, Ken Skea, had already signed up for Comrades, and it would be fun running with someone I knew. The Comrades Marathon (as it's officially called) is an 89-km race and holds the Guinness World Record as the largest and oldest ultramarathon in the world, with 18,000 participants.

It was good to have a goal. Sue was right: the New Year presented me with a whole new scenario. The first two days were okay. After all, I was used to taking days off during my year of marathons. I happily ate bacon sandwiches on New Year's Day and the day after, and watched English soccer, without really knowing what to expect in the days to come.

Day three seemed okay too, maybe because we were still caught up in the thrill of my achievement, still reminiscing about the year and working on the fundraising. That day, Sue and I were out the door at 5 a.m. to attend to an early-morning media appointment with CBC Radio's *Eyeopener*. Jim Brown, the show's host, is a pro and makes his guests feel truly comfortable. He wanted to know how I was feeling and how the fundraising was coming along. By this point, Marathon Quest 250 had raised \$212,000.

Then, in the middle of January, Sarah at Right To Play invited me to travel to Benin to visit some schools that were using RTP programs. She learned that I would be doing the Comrades ultra in May, so she organized my trip to Benin for after that event. I was thrilled. Later, in February, RTP made me an honorary athlete ambassador, and I found out I would be accompanying two other athlete ambassadors to Benin. The trip was a future event I could build on! I think knowing I was going there helped me continue on through the weird days of January 2011.

At 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 24, I gave Sue a big hug at the Calgary airport and boarded a plane for London Heathrow. Two days later, at 10 a.m. on Thursday morning, I landed in Durban. The next two days I rested. At 3 a.m. on Sunday, May 29, I met up with my running buddy, Ken Skea, in the Polo Room of the Durban Hilton for a pre-race breakfast. Ken was working in India and it was great to see him again.

I eat the same breakfast before any race: oatmeal, honey and a banana. The plan was to leave the hotel at 4:45 a.m. and make our way over to City Hall, two blocks away. As we headed to the start line, we overheard participants complaining about how cold it was. The temperature was 15°C, which is a pleasant summer's day in Cochrane. If only it had stayed that way! The race had 16,000 starters and the streets were packed with people trying to get to the start line. Ken and I were seeded in Section D, and we were jammed into our corral like sardines.



At 5:15 a.m. the crowd started singing “Shosholoza,” a folksong sung by Ndebele migrants from Zimbabwe who worked in South Africa’s mines. Some people call it South Africa’s “second national anthem.” After that, “Chariots of Fire” started to blare out of the loudspeakers. At 5:30, as the cock crowed, we set off to run the 86th Annual Comrades Marathon. The cut-time was 12 hours and I made it in 11:51:23, a little to close for comfort. Next stop Benin.

Right To Play has been in Benin since 2001, employing three core sports- and play-based education programs: Red Ball Child Play, Live Safe Play Safe, and Early Child Play. As well, in 2011, after piloting an ongoing teacher-training program, Right To Play joined with Benin’s Ministry of Early Childhood & Primary Education to introduce an early childhood play-based curriculum for 80,000 children.

My introduction to Benin started on Monday, May 30, when I landed at the Cotonou airport and, upon stepping out of the plane, was hit by a wall of heat. It had been warm in Durban, but nothing prepared me for the furnace-like temperatures of Benin. Himi from Right To Play met me in the arrivals area and drove me to Hotel Ibis. It was a hair-raising ride involving hundreds of motorbikes and scooters zipping around us and weaving in and out of the traffic. Fortunately I arrived in one piece.





Saturday was a big day for me. Not only was it my last day in Benin but also I was scheduled to lead a marathon for a group of kids. The farthest I had run in Benin so far was 2.6 km, so doing a marathon just a week after the Comrades and in 30°C heat and 90 per cent humidity seemed a monumental task. Arriving at the CEG1 sports field, I spotted 25 runners, all wearing numbers.

I was introduced to all the children and youth. Their leader was 26-year-old Parfaite, a member of the Benin women's soccer team. I asked about the marathon, and she said that 30 minutes of running would be enough. I must say, I was relieved! We ran around the sports field a couple of times then headed out onto the streets of Cotonou. Again, I experienced the challenge of running in this city.

The motorists and motorcyclists just weren't used to runners, especially girls, and a few of them shouted at us. After 30 minutes we'd covered 4.5 km, and everyone was back at the sports field safe and sound. Parfaite said that the group wanted to start a running club, so I asked her what it would be named. She went over to the group and they discussed my question. Five minutes later, she returned. She said they wanted to be called the "Undefeatables."



Undefeatables. That word pretty much summed up my feelings after five days in Benin. The kids I had met just want to be given a chance. They didn't want charity or pity. They wanted encouragement and support. For the first time, I saw with my own eyes how Right To Play was providing that helping hand. I had found my new "normal," to carry on fundraising for Right To Play.

On the 37 hours it took me to travel from Cotonou, Benin, to Calgary, Alberta, I came up with a plan. Arriving home, I gave Sue a big hug and said those dreaded words, "Sue, I have an idea." I called it "Quest for Kids" and the plan was to do ten "Quests" in five years and raise \$1million for Right To Play. One quest had already been completed, and that left nine to go.

Here is the outcome of that five years of effort:



**Quest #1: *Marathon Quest 250* (January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2010)**

**Objective:** to run 250 marathons in one year

**Location:** Cochrane and Calgary, Alberta, Canada

**Status:** Completed (250 marathons in one calendar year)

**Amount raised:** \$322,000

**Matching funds:** No

**Kids helped:** 6,440

**Funds application:** Unrestricted



**Quest #2: Netball Quest 61 (September 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

**Objective:** to play 61 hours of Netball and set a Guinness World Record

**Location:** Calgary, Alberta, Canada

**Status:** Guinness World Record set (61 hours)

**Amount raised:** \$22,600

**Matching funds:** No

**Kids helped:** 452

**Funds application:** Unrestricted



### **Quest #3: Lacrosse Quest 24 (April 27<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> 2012)**

**Objective:** to play 24 hours of Lacrosse and set a Guinness World Record

**Location:** Calgary, Alberta, Canada

**Status:** Guinness World Record set (24 hours)

**Amount raised:** \$42,493

**Matching funds:** Yes. \$127,479 (total \$169,972)

**Kids helped:** 3,399

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa



**Quest #4: Cook Islands Quest 100 (September 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012)**

**Objective:** To run around the Island of Rarotonga three times and complete 100 km.

**Location:** Rarotonga, Cook Islands

**Status:** Completed (100 km in 16 hours)

**Amount raised:** \$7,888

**Matching funds:** Yes. \$23,664 (total \$31,552)

**Kids helped:** 631

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa



**Quest #5: *TriOil-Soccer Quest 42* (October 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 2012)**

**Objective:** to play 42 hours of five-a-side soccer and set a Guinness World Record

**Location:** Cochrane, Alberta, Canada

**Status:** Guinness World Record set (42 hours)

**Amount raised:** \$35,704

**Matching funds:** Yes. \$107,112 (total \$142,816)

**Kids helped:** 2,856

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa







**Quest #6: Hockey Quest 500 (January 19<sup>th</sup> 2013)**

**Objective:** 500 players in an exhibition game of hockey and set a Guinness World Record

**Location:** Cochrane, Alberta, Canada

**Status:** Guinness World Record set (374 participants)

**Amount raised:** \$100,000

**Matching funds:** Yes. \$300,000 (total \$400,000)

**Kids helped:** 8,000

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa



Quest #7: *Kilimanjaro Quest 95.2* (March 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 2013)

**Objective:** Run the Kilimanjaro Marathon (42.2 km) then climb to the summit in 24 hours

**Location:** Kilimanjaro, Tanzania

**Status:** Completed (summitted in 21 hours)

**Amount raised:** \$5,242

**Matching funds:** Yes. \$15,726 (total \$20,968)

**Kids helped:** 419

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa



**Quest #8: *TransRockies Quest 888* (May to October 2013)**

**Objective:** to run/bike all ten events (888 km) hosted by TransRockies Events

**Location:** Western Canada and USA

**Status:** Completed (nine events for 920 km)

**Amount raised:** Matching \$41,032, unrestricted \$4,158, Total \$45,190

**Matching funds:** \$123,096 (total \$164,128), unrestricted \$4,158, Total \$168,286

**Kids helped:** 3,366

**Funds application:** Benin, West Africa / Unrestricted (Oct. 31, 2013)





**Quest #9: Rotary Coastal Quest 630 (March 4<sup>th</sup> to April 1<sup>st</sup> 2014)**

**Objective:** Run/Amble/Walk the South West Coast Path (630 miles / 1014 km)

**Location:** South West Coast Path, Minehead to Poole, England

**Status:** Completed (1014 km in 25 days)

**Amount raised:** \$23,776

**Matching funds:** No

**Kids helped:** 476

**Funds application:** Unrestricted







**Quest #10: *Canada Quest for Kids* (Sept 19<sup>th</sup> to Oct 14<sup>th</sup> 2014)**

**Objective:** Complete 10 Guinness World Records at ten universities across Canada

**Location:** Canada

**Status:** One Guinness World Record (Ball Hockey) verified

**Amount raised:** \$65,029.34

**Matching funds:** No

**Kids helped:** 1,301

**Funds application:** Unrestricted

In total we raised \$1,367,000 for Right To Play and gave the gift of hope to 27,340 children.