

BORN TO RUN

Who knows why people excel at the things they do? Some have talent, others dedication. Some have the great luck to combine the two. A very few seem born for their calling. Derek Tanner is one of those.

No doubt you've seen him on television. Almost everybody has. Pounding across the finish line in Boston or Atlanta, leaning into the last hill in San Francisco, flying down the long straightaway in Houston. Nearly always running alone, elbows raised as if he's about to take off, head held at that funny angle with his hair floating back like little wings, those wild eyes staring straight ahead like aimed lasers. Nobody in the world runs like he does.

Derek didn't always run marathons. That came later, after the accident. When he married Sue, shortly before that, he had never entered a race of any kind.

The new Mrs. Tanner was serious about marathons and planned to compete in the summer Olympics. Derek didn't much like running, but he was serious about Sue, so he talked her into letting him go out with her for the first run of the day. They didn't go far—a mile or so—but he enjoyed being out in the early morning and the way he felt after it was over. Sue would go out again later, without him. But they were very religious about that first run of the day.

The accident happened near the end of June. They had come up out of the park by the lake and were crossing the street. Sue was a bit ahead and didn't see the car as it careened around the corner. Derek's first reaction was fear for Sue. He sprinted into the crosswalk and threw himself at her.

He got her clear of the path of the car, with only a severely sprained ankle. He almost made it, too, but not quite. The car struck him on the hip, fracturing his pelvis and damaging his spine. They weren't sure he would live. They knew he'd never walk again.

Once he would not have. But as a potential Olympian Sue had contacts, and she made the most of them. As soon as the bones knit they cut his thighs open and attached electrodes to the main trunks of the severed nerves. And then they implanted two little computers in his hips, programmed for walking. The computers talked to each other and to his legs, and they listened to electrodes higher up in Derek's spine. When he did what people do in their heads when they want to walk, the computers got the message and fired the leg muscles. It was not quite like normal walking, but it got the job done. They could find no way to feed back much information from legs to head, so unless he really exerted himself he could walk almost without feeling it.

Sue's sprain healed before Derek's injuries, and she went back to her daily training. It was too late for the Olympics, but there were other marathons. Derek used to sit at the front window to watch her leave and then come back. Things were not as good without their morning run together.

So when he finally mastered walking, he asked for a new program to let him run. This was more complicated. There is a point in the running stride when both feet are off the ground. Derek's computers would lose track of where he was until one foot landed. Very confusing. But after many trials, they made it work.

Derek again began running with Sue in the morning. At first he couldn't make even half a mile. But over a period of months, he got his strength back. He'd never worked so hard at anything in his life, and it paid off. He got more than his strength back, for he now had legs that did not seem to tire. He went a full ten to fifteen miles with Sue. Before long he was setting a pace she could not match. And so she talked him into entering the next marathon she ran in. Maybe it was partially a lark, but Sue says he was as serious as she was.

You know what happened. He won. That story has been told over and over in the media. It's a natural human interest piece. Cripple wins first marathon. Earnest young man makes good against overwhelming odds. Nice guy finishes first. You know how it always is.

But the real story didn't happen until his second marathon, the one he ran against Moses M'botu, the great Ugandan who had never been beaten. They started out shoulder to shoulder in front of the pack, M'botu running with that smooth, gliding stride he was famous for, and Derek pounding along in that strange fashion of his, bulging at the hips where the computers were implanted. At ten miles they were still matching strides, and now people were getting excited. This was a faster time than M'botu's best effort.

At fifteen miles the Ugandan was a step or two ahead, but he couldn't pull away. Both runners were showing effects of the pace. M'botu's stride was no longer quite so fluid. Derek's stride never changed, but he was redder in the face than I have ever seen another human. About there he dumped ice water over himself, but it seemed to make no difference.

Somewhere just past twenty miles it must have happened. Later, M'botu said he thought that Derek had stumbled and was going to fall. But when he didn't even slow down, the African couldn't imagine what was happening. If anything, Derek ran faster. It's hard to tell about that since M'botu was having his own troubles. He was running on sheer guts.

But Derek was running on his little computers. Even after he crossed the finish line, yards ahead, he didn't slow down until Sue called out to him. We watched him come pounding in, leaning far over to one side, arms hanging limp, mouth gaping with a little bit of froth at one corner, eyes blasted out and vacant. Sue was already screaming for an ambulance as she tried to keep him from collapsing.

Somewhere on the course, after twenty miles, Derek had a massive stroke. He had to have been in pain. But somewhere in his mind he didn't stop running, and so the little computers kept driving the leg muscles as they carried a semi-conscious man across the finish line. Incredible.

Derek was very sick again. And afterward, despite the best therapy they could contrive, he couldn't talk or control the posture of his head. His hands and arms were never strong again. And most of his mind seemed as vacant as his eyes on that day he beat M'botu and set a new record. During treatments, he was a more passive participant than Sue, who wouldn't give up on him.

Now he spends most of his time sitting at the front window, watching people and squirrels in the park across the street. At least, Sue says he watches them. I'd hate to speculate about what goes on inside that head. He sits and smiles pleasantly until it's time to go out and run with Sue. They modified his program, to put a governor on him, but they didn't think they could take away his greatest pleasure in life.

Sue doesn't run marathons anymore, but she takes him to a few. There were objections, for a while, until someone made the case that Derek's computers were not really like drugs but more like a wheelchair or a pacemaker. Nobody wanted to ban them, so they let Derek continue to run. He stands there in the crowd, smiling pleasantly, until they begin to move, and then he

goes pounding away, running alone, just as you've seen him. He doesn't win them all anymore, but he always finishes. Sue is there at the end to call out to him, and take him home.

It seems a strange life. Maybe Derek doesn't see it that way, if he sees it any way at all. Sue doesn't, but she's a runner, too. Legs are made to run. Races are made to win. And Derek runs like nobody else who ever lived. So he ought to run races.

But I can't help wondering. If Sue didn't get there to stop him he'd probably cross the finish line and keep going until he dropped. And I can't imagine what will happen when he gets too old to run.

The ancient Greeks would know what to do with him. They'd place him in the sky, somewhere between the Great Bear and Orion the Archer, and watch him go by every night. I'm afraid all we can do is take away his little computers. And that would be a hell of a thing to do to a man born to run.

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