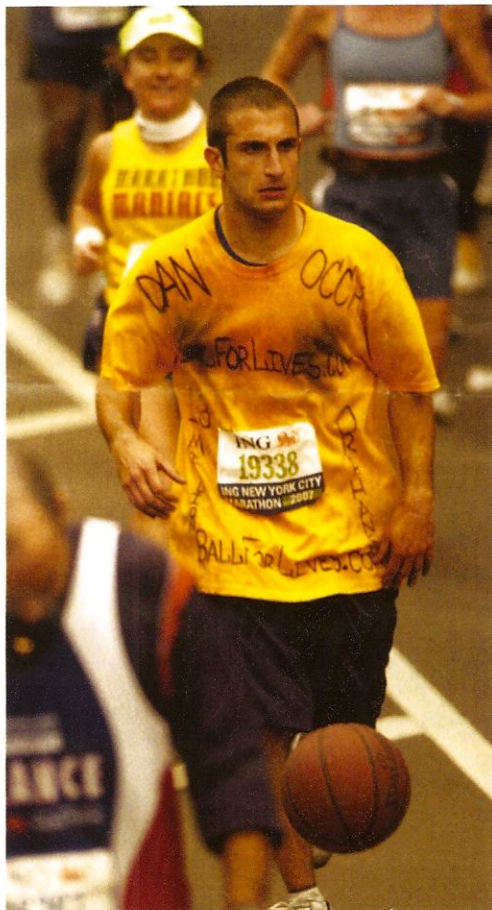


PEOPLE

Marathon Man



IN THE MIDST OF ALMOST 40,000 runners stampeding through the Big Apple at last November's New York City Marathon, Dan Occhiogrosso dribbled a basketball for every step of the 26.2-mile race. He did it to raise awareness and solicit donations for young AIDS victims in South Africa, and even with the ball at his side, crossed the finish line faster than almost half the field, clocking in at just under five hours.

"You can really attempt things that are much, much bigger than yourself," says Occhiogrosso. "Dribbling in front of all of those people was unreal. But the biggest thing is going for something that people say you're crazy for, succeeding, and it being so much greater than everyday life."

Occhiogrosso, who played guard at NCAA D-III Baptist Bible College (Clarks Summit, Penn.), said he'd wanted to run a marathon ever since his father ran one years earlier, but also drew inspiration from a cause that exceeded his personal drive for success; he wanted to accomplish something for himself while also benefiting others. During the NYC

Marathon he wore a bright yellow t-shirt that read "BallForLives.com," his web site devoted to raising money for African orphans through the sale of hoops instructional videos.

"People from the crowd would see me dribbling the ball in and out of traffic and scream, 'Way to multi-task!'" says Occhiogrosso. "The other runners who could read my shirt were really supportive of my cause. A lot of them patted me on the back and said that they loved what I was doing."

Although many participants were encouraging, their propensity to drop cups filled with Gatorade and water at the hydration stations every mile created some hazards that required careful maneuvering.

"I was worried that the ball wasn't going to make it through the stickiness and the wetness," Dan says of the Spalding Never Flat rock that made the trek with him. "But it was great — one ball lasted the whole race."

Dan started training four months prior to race day, beginning with a five-minute run that didn't even cover an entire mile. He worked his way up to training distances as great as 21 miles

leading up to the marathon.

Remarkably, Dan insists that logging hundreds of miles while pounding the rock didn't drastically improve his handle, nor was it all that difficult.

"If you play basketball on any consistent basis and you have a handle, it's not hard," he says. "It forces you to keep your arms in the same basic motion as running."

Dan swears that over the course of the entire race, he only lost control of the ball once, when he tried to go behind-the-back in traffic and dribbled the ball off another runner's foot before quickly recovering.

"When I crossed the finish line, literally every part of my quads totally cramped," Occhiogrosso says. "My running partner was there with his hands in the air, and all I could think was that my legs were just killing me. But it was great to finish. I guess I didn't quite realize what I had just done."

—ANDREW KATZ

For more information on Occhiogrosso's cause, go to www.ballforlives.com.