

STANDING FAST

Matt Long, shown at the FDNY's training facility on Randall's Island in October 2008, has endured dozens of surgeries and has a titanium rod running the length of his left leg.



A SECOND LIFE

MATT LONG had life by the horns—until the day he got crushed by a 20-ton bus. Though the once unstoppable firefighter and Ironman suffered horrific injuries, he somehow survived. Then he had to do something even harder: learn to live again. So Long took on another impossible challenge. He decided to run a marathon

By Charles Butler Photographs by David Yellen



GOOD COMPANY
Long worked the better part of a decade with the guys from Engine Company 53, Ladder 43, in East Harlem.

THE SUN IS BARELY UP ON THIS NOVEMBER MORNING,

but already Matt Long is in a rush. The career fireman knows the importance of moving fast: It can save a life. Today, however, he can't seem to move quick enough. It took 10 stressful minutes to find the disabled-athlete starting area for the ING New York City Marathon. Until three years ago, he'd never have imagined lining up for a race alongside people who are blind or depend on crutches or sit in wheelchairs—and who will get a three-hour head start on the field. But those three years have been packed with humbling surprises. Long is flanked by two longtime buddies, fellow fireman Frank Carino and

Noel Flynn, who works at a Manhattan hedge fund. Carino has done an 11-hour Ironman triathlon, while Flynn is on the cusp of a sub-three-hour marathon. Still, they've agreed to hang with their friend, step by step, for a very slow run through New York City. It could take eight or nine hours. Long's really not sure. All he knows is that until he finishes, his exhausting battle to restore his body, his identity, and his connections to loved ones won't be complete either.

Long wobbles over to a police barricade to stretch his legs. He adjusts his black skullcap. Then he gives his knee-high compression socks a final tug. He hopes they'll give his battered legs some extra support. Long's friends take note—and let him have it.

"Yo, Frank," says Flynn. "Check out Matty's legs."

"Very nice, Matty," says Carino. "Ya look like Paula Radcliffe."

For a while, Long joins in as the jokes fly, but he has other things on his mind. The fast-talking, hard-charging fireman is about to run the slowest race of his life, and even if he finishes, he's surely going to suffer. He paces around like his life depends on what happens over the next 26 miles. And maybe it does.

ON DECEMBER 22, 2005, NEW YORK CITY WOKE UP TO 28°F temperatures and day three of a transit strike. For 48 hours, the 33,000-person Transport Workers Union had violated a state law prohibiting city employees from staging a job action. Union and city negotiators kept bargaining, but no settlement was in sight. The strike forced New Yorkers to find new ways to get around.

Matt Long was among them. That morning around 5:30, the

12-year veteran of the New York City Fire Department left his apartment on East 48th Street on his road bike, wearing a ski mask and a red and silver jacket over a winter biking kit. He had a 20-minute ride ahead of him, to the Rock on Randall's Island.

The Rock is shorthand for the FDNY's training academy. It's where probation officers go to see if they can make it onto the nation's largest fire-fighting department. The Rock resembles a Hollywood back lot, 22 acres dotted with faux walk-ups and high-rises. For six months, probies haul hoses up and down stairs with up to 100 pounds on their backs. They crawl through dark tunnels while breathing through oxygen masks. They do whatever they're told so they're ready when a fire alarm goes off.

It was the next-to-last day of Long's yearlong assignment with the academy's health and fitness squad. His job was to ensure probies were physically prepared to graduate and save lives. He was planning to take a week of vacation, then return to his permanent job at Engine Company 53, Ladder 43, in East Harlem.

Long, 39 at the time, fit in perfectly at the Rock. He was relentlessly upbeat and radiated strength. He came from blue-collar Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and a family with eight siblings. He had two brothers in the FDNY. Long had worked amid the chaos at Ground Zero on 9/11. And he had a "save" to his credit. On Christmas Eve 2000, his company responded to a fire in a tenement that was thought to be abandoned. But while putting out the fire, Long saw a stack of mail in front of one apartment. So, he entered the unit and found an elderly man unconscious on the floor. With another firefighter's help, he dragged the man to safety.

While at the Rock, Long worked himself into the best shape of his life. He had only been biking and running seriously for a year and a half; he got into the sports when he was having back pain and a doctor urged him to lose some of the 212 pounds he was carrying on his 5'11" frame. Within a few months, he was down 30 pounds, over the back pain, and suddenly addicted to triathlons. In fact, he competed in more than 20 events of various distances over an 18-month span. "The adrenaline rush—I loved it," he says. "It was like rushing to a fire. I was hooked."

So it was little surprise Long would attempt—and finish—his first Ironman triathlon, a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, and 26.2-mile run, in Lake Placid, New York, in July 2005. He finished in 11 hours and 18 minutes, placing in the top 20 percent for his age group and running the marathon leg in 3:44:38.

Next, Long set his sights on the 2005 New York City Marathon. But not just to run it. He wanted to go 3:15 and qualify for Boston. In August, Long began running workdays at 6 a.m. with three trainers at the Rock: Tommy Grimshaw, Shane McKeon, and Larry Parker. No day was a gimme. On Mondays and Wednesdays they ran 12 miles, pushing eight of those at a 6:15 clip. Tuesdays and Thursdays were easy eight-milers. And Friday was an 18-miler, with miles four to 12 at a six-minute pace. At first, Long couldn't keep up. "But after a month, Matty wasn't far behind us. Pretty soon he was sticking with us," says McKeon. "We pushed

each other; our goal was for all of us to qualify for Boston."

As it turned out, all four made it. Long went 3:13:59, good enough to place fourth among the 201 New York firefighters who ran. They'd start ramping up for Boston right after New Year's.

Today, on this frigid morning, three days before Christmas, a light swim was in store. McKeon, Grimshaw, and Parker waited at the Rock as Matt Long started to cycle up Third Avenue.



"HEY, HOW DID WE DO WITH THAT FIRST MILE?"

"Around 17:30. That work for you, Matt?"

"Yeah, pretty close to what I expected."

By now Long, Carino, and Flynn are halfway across the Verazano-Narrows Bridge. To their left, Manhattan's skyline is backlit in light blue. In front of them, there's nothing but the metal skyway. The other early starters are out of sight, having rushed off on crutches and in chairs.

When Long ran here in 2005, he did the first mile in an easy 7:40. Today he stutters across the span, his brawny shoulders listing and lurching side to side. As he pushes off his left leg, the one filled with titanium, the three grossly distorted hammer toes on his left foot jab into the ground. His right leg, an inch shorter than his left, follows in a contorted motion, barely bending as he forces his foot forward. Each step consumes inches, not feet.



THE BUS MOVED UP THIRD AVENUE, TWO LANES OVER from the shoulder where Matt Long and his bike were gaining speed. It wasn't a typical city bus. A brokerage firm, Bear Stearns, had hired the coach to transport employees to work during the transit strike. The driver was from Albany, so maybe he didn't know that making turns outside of the marked bus lane was prohibited by law. Or perhaps he just didn't see the biker. Whatever the reason, the bus started turning right onto 52nd Street—and right into Matt Long.

Later, one cop at the scene would wonder why the biker didn't ricochet backward on impact. That's what typically happens in a collision like this. But when Long crashed into the bus, he got



CRUSHING NEWS

Every major media outlet in New York City covered Long's accident on December 22, 2005.

COURTESY WCBS-TV

A SECOND LIFE



DIFFICULT STEPS

Scenes from Long's epic recovery (top to bottom): gaunt and wheelchair bound in May 2006; learning to walk again with crutches three months later; training in Central Park with friend Frank Carino (left) in October 2008.



vacuumed underneath. By the time the bus came to a stop, Long and his bike were twisted near the rear axle. The bike's handlebars got jammed into the coach's metal base and speared Long, opening a fissure from his belly button to his rectum. Blood slid from under the vehicle and began pooling near the corner.

A police officer happened to be nearby and called for backup. The NYPD's Emergency Service Unit arrived four minutes later. One detective, Charles King, went to work lifting the front of the bus with a hydraulic jack, while two others, Ralph Logan and Charlie Raz, crawled under. They heard Long moan, "so we knew he was alive," recalls Logan. They yelled out for a portable saw so they could cut the handlebars from the bus and Long's stomach. But because of the blood gushing from Long's midsection, "it was like an oil slick under there," Logan says. "I had to wedge my feet up on the bottom of the bus to keep from sliding." As the officers sawed, firefighters from a midtown station arrived. One of them, Donal Buckley, crawled under the bus to help. He grabbed the bike frame, steadying it as officers kept sawing.

It took a couple of minutes for the officers to free Long. They rolled him onto a backboard, pushed him from under the bus, and lifted him onto a gurney. At that point, Long was drifting in and out of consciousness, though he managed to mouth the word *forty*. Buckley looked at his face; it was pasty white but familiar. He remembered a fireman who used to park his car in front of his firehouse to run in nearby Central Park.

"Hey," Buckley blurted. "That's Matty Long, from Ladder 43."



AS LONG, CARINO, AND FLYNN STUTTER DOWN THE ramp off the Verrazano and start looping into Brooklyn, Long says, "I used to come out every year and watch this race. Never missed it." Bay Ridge is the first neighborhood runners hit after the bridge. Long's family moved there when he was a teenager.

In a few hours, locals will line Fourth Avenue, cheering on a sea of marathoners. But now, the street is practically empty except for a clump of about 40 people waiting in front of Our Lady of Angels Church near the three-mile mark. It's Long's family and friends. Matt told his mom and dad that he'd stop for exactly 90 seconds—enough time for them to snap a few pictures. The noise grows until Long shuffles to a stop in front of his parents, and hugs them. His two sisters, Maureen and Eileen, hold their kids, and cry. Some of his brothers and nephews hold signs that say "Matty, We Love You" and "Matty, You Will."

The 90 seconds pass quickly. Long tells his family he has to go. A block later, he turns to his left. He's tearing up. "Hey, Frank."

"Yeah, Matt."

"The allergies, bro. They're starting to kick in."

"Take it slow, bro. Take it slow."



MOST MORNINGS, DR. SOUMITRA R. EACHEMPATI, A trauma surgeon at New York-Presbyterian Hospital on Manhattan's Upper East Side, walks to work from his nearby apartment. On this day, however, he walked a bit faster after getting a call from the ER about a biker who'd been carved open by a bus.

Orthopedic surgeon Dr. Dean Lorich had a trickier commute. He lives 20 blocks from the hospital. Because of the transit strike, police were restricting cars or taxis with fewer than four passengers. So to get to work that day, Lorich had to fill a cab with his pregnant wife and two young daughters.

Both doctors arrived to find Matt Long, bleeding to death.

Jim Long was the first family member to get to the hospital; he's a year younger than Matt and works in the FDNY's public affairs office. When Jim arrived at the ER, a nurse told him that his brother was already in the operating room. "This is as bad as it gets," she said. "We're doing everything we can." Jim Long then looked to his left toward the emergency room, where puddles of red were everywhere. He asked the nurse if they came from his brother. She nodded. "My parents are coming very soon," he said to the nurse. "Can you please clean that up?"

Due to the heavy blood loss, Long's blood pressure was dangerously low by the time he reached the OR. His body was also mangled with a compound fracture of the left tibia and femur, a compound fracture of the left foot, a fractured right shoulder, a fractured right hip, perforated abdominal walls, a torn rectum, extensive pelvic nerve damage, and a crushed pelvis.

"His chances for living were five percent," Eachempati says. "Maybe even less than that."

The OR was a madhouse, as multiple teams of doctors, residents, anesthesiologists, and nurses scrambled to follow Eachempati and Lorich's orders. The two lead doctors went about separate, syncopated tasks to keep Long alive. Eachempati tried to stanch the bleeding, but as soon as he could control one perforated vessel, another would appear. Twice, he had to abbreviate his work so radiologists could embolize bleeding that his fingers couldn't reach. All the while, the team kept transfusing pints and pints of blood into Long's body as he kept bleeding. "He lost an extraordinary amount," recalls Eachempati. "In 12 hours, he lost 48 units." That's six gallons—four times the amount of blood in a body Long's size.

Lorich worked to stabilize Long's broken pelvis. "All the big blood vessels are coming through the pelvis from the aorta and going down to your legs, so when he ripped everything, he tore all those arteries," says Lorich. "And it ripped through his anus and tore his rectum out, so he's pouring stool into the pelvis."

That night, the best physicians could tell Mike and Eileen Long and their eight kids was that Matt was still alive. Doctors also said that even if Long survived the blood loss, he could die of pneumonia or another infection or wind up in a vegetative state.

"That first day," recalls Lorich, "I think everybody other than Eachempati thought he would die." Lorich did a stint in Germany treating U.S. soldiers who'd

been hurt in Iraq, and says that Long's abdominal and pelvic wounds exceeded the injuries of many soldiers who'd been hit by mortar fire.

Over the next few weeks, as doctors continued to open and close Long up for follow-up surgeries, a serious infection never took hold. Long remained in a chemically induced coma. Finally, he came to on January 7. But he looked nothing like an Ironman. Long would lose nearly 50 pounds, most of it muscle, while in the hospital. "The first time I went to see him, I walked right past him," said Shane McKeon. "He looked like an 85-year-old dying of cancer."

So why didn't Long die? One theory, says Eachempati, is that "we actually got the blood loss controlled within eight to 10 hours." Just as critical, the doctor adds, Long was "obviously very fit, and that definitely contributed to his survivability. His body was resilient enough to withstand such a metabolic insult."

"Taking care of Matt reinforced some things that I'd already thought," he adds. "One is to never give up on anybody. Two, the human body can be trained to withstand severe insults. And three, never shortchange the will of the patient."

Matt Long certainly had a strong will. He'd qualified for Boston the first time he put his mind to it. He'd survived lots of burning buildings and having the World Trade Center crumble around him. But after five months and 22 surgeries, the man



NEW YORK'S BRAVEST

Long, shown with members of his firehouse, once rescued an unconscious man from a burning building.

TOP TO BOTTOM: BRYAN SMITH/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS; MATTHEW MCDERMOTT/POLARIS IMAGES; CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDFUX

A SECOND LIFE

whom doctors had saved and rebuilt was no longer the same man who'd gone under that bus. Surviving that kind of trauma was one thing. Finding the will to live again would be another thing entirely.



THEY RUN THROUGH BROOKLYN SIDE-BY-SIDE, STOPPING to walk only when they come to a water stop or need a bathroom. They tell stories and jokes. Flynn offers one up about a Chinaman, an Irishman, and an Italian. Carino follows with one about a Pole, an Irishman, and an Italian. After that, Long says, "Enough," and they all laugh.

Next, Long riffs a bit about the nearby Catholic high school he attended and some of his favorite bars in the city. Then he tells a story about his younger brother Rob. "I got an e-mail from him last night just before I went to bed. He wrote me something he'd never told me before. I guess on Christmas Eve, just after the accident, my whole family was at the hospital. But around 6 o'clock, Rob left to go to an AA meeting—he's an alcoholic. And on the way back to the hospital, he passed this dirty, dingy bar. There were three old men in it, and he said it would have been a perfect spot to go in and just sit, and, you know, have a drink. He stood outside for, like, 20 minutes. And he kept thinking of going in. Finally, he said, 'No, Matty's dying up in that hospital. I can't be that selfish.' He said there was definitely a power higher than him, and it was me—I brought him back to

the hospital and kept him from going in. And he's still sober today. He said me lying there in that bed inspired him."

Everyone runs in silence for a while after that.



HE WAS A FIREMAN, A BAR OWNER, AND A BACHELOR. HE ran, biked, and played hoops, always hard. He traveled, drank beer and wine, and was the top cook at his firehouse. He had six brothers, but called everybody bro. He teased, tweaked, and told a good story. He had hundreds of friends. He raised lots of money for charity. He liked country music even though he was from Brooklyn. He always made people laugh.

Long was popular with the ladies, too. He dated, often. There was the pretty brunette with whom he made eye contact as he was watching the marathon by his firehouse—a look that yielded a few dates with the young actress. (His firehouse pals like to remind him of the time they saw her in a commercial for a herpes remedy.) There was the girl from Bay Ridge, but that crumbled after they ran a marathon together. And there was the girl he was engaged to, but they never made it to the altar. As one friend said, "He was always looking for the right one."

"He had the whole works," says his brother Rob. "Good-looking guy, good personality. All the girls chased after him."

For months, when he was in the hospital, the party came to him. Every weekday, firefighters from all over the city brought meals to the Long family and everyone else who'd come by to see him. On Saturdays, the Asphalt Green Triathlon Club made lasagna, pot roast, chicken, you name it. "Matt was our teammate," says Allison Caccoma, who supervised the meals. "He used to host our parties at his bar. How could you not help?"

Of course, friends couldn't always see what Long had to endure. A titanium rod ran through his left leg, virtually from his hip to his ankle, supporting his shattered tibia and femur. Metal screws kept the bones of his left foot in place. His right leg was an inch shorter than it had been before the accident, a side effect of his broken pelvis. His right abductors (the powerful buttock muscles that keep us erect and help propel us) were basically dead. He could raise his right shoulder no higher than 90 degrees. He underwent several surgeries to try to heal his battered abdominal-wall muscles, and his stomach was sealed by processed cadaver skin. His internal injuries left him tethered to a colostomy bag. He had to relearn how to walk. Lorch warned that it could take two years before Long could dispense with crutches or a cane, and to expect an early onset of arthritis.

Still, Lorch was stunned by how quickly he healed. On May 24, 2006, five months after getting run over by the bus, Long got the okay to go home. He held a press conference in the hospital lobby before leaving. Every major New York City TV station, radio station, and newspaper covered it. He came off an elevator

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Among Long's athletic exploits (clockwise from top left): playing college hoops; running the 2005 New York City Marathon; riding a mechanical bull in Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and competing in a half-Ironman in 2005.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY MATT LONG; COURTESY BRIGHTROOM; COURTESY MATT LONG; ASI PHOTO



GAME FACE

One doctor estimates that Matt Long had less than a five percent chance of surviving his ordeal.

in a wheelchair, then stood and walked to a podium on crutches. Flashbulbs blinked, and family, friends, and hospital staff in attendance applauded. He looked thin and unsteady behind the podium, and his voice sounded strained. But at points he sounded like the old Matt Long. “When I decided to become a fireman, someone said, ‘You’ll become bald and fat.’ Well, I’m definitely bald,” he said as he lifted off his baseball cap, “but I ain’t fat.” He also showed anger. He lashed out at Roger Toussaint, the transit union leader who had called the December 2005 strike. “It’s against the law for civil servants to strike. If the Fire Department went on strike, and it was his neighbor’s house or his house or someone’s house, and we stood idly by watching that burn while you had to wait for firefighters from Jersey or somewhere else to come and put it out, how would you feel, Mr. Toussaint?”

He told reporters he still had hopes to do some of the things he once planned to do. Maybe, he said, he’d tackle another Ironman. Those dreams were for another day. “I can only say I wish this was the end,” he said, “and I know it’s not.” And then he left the hospital and returned to his one-bedroom apartment.



AT MILE NINE, THEY LOOK BACK AND SEE THE ELITE women closing. Among them are Paula Radcliffe, the defending champion from England, and Kara Goucher, the American Olympian making her marathon debut. Finally, after a few hours, the guys are about to have some company. Long doesn’t waste a second.

“Noel, listen. When they get closer, run up ahead and get a picture of them passing me. Got it, bro? And try to get me in a shot with Kara. I met her the other night.”

“She’s cute, Matty.”

“Yeah, and she’s also married. Just get the shot.”

“Okay, here they come. Smile, Matty.”



THE LETTER CAME FROM SOMEONE HE DIDN’T EVEN know—a friend of a friend—while he was still in the hospital. She wrote, *Don’t worry. You’ll run again. I can help. I work with disabled athletes.* When he read *disabled*, the color returned to his face. He called his friend at once.

“What the fuck? What does she mean *disabled*?”

“She means well.”

“Well, this is the way it came across: She’s telling me I am going to be crippled.”

After a couple of weeks and then months back in his apartment, though, Long started to wonder if maybe the letter writer had been right. He did his rehab, 90 minutes every day: exercises on the treadmill to rekindle his walking muscles, upper-body weights to make that right shoulder more flexible. But any progress seemed marginal relative to his larger goals. How could he stroke through the water if he could barely lift his right arm

RAISING MATT LONG

Mike and Eileen Long cheered their son as he grappled with countless challenges—including the quest to run 26.2 miles.

above his shoulder? How could he ride his bike when it was uncomfortable just to sit? And how could he run if he couldn’t even walk? Lorich had said that the abductor muscles in his right glute might never pick up neural signals again. Often, Long’s right leg would uncontrollably flare out at a 45-degree angle.

Gimping around the city streets on crutches left him nervous about what might tip him over. And while he had no memory of that morning when his life changed, he still winced when a bus would come to a stop nearby. More and more, he came to realize how challenging his life was and would continue to be. “I have disappointment in my life, and mental struggles every day,” he said one day nearly a year after he left the hospital. “How much do I have to pay for this? How much longer am I going to suffer before I can walk longer, before I can live longer? All I do now is therapy. I don’t have much going on.”

Others close to him saw the rising frustration. “His body was in shambles, his life was in shambles,” his father says. “He was always a fast-moving guy—not only in sports but in everything. And now he hit a wall, and everything came to a real stop.”

Long’s poor mobility was only one part of his social paralysis. There was also that colostomy bag that never left his side. Forget about swimming or biking or running—try going to Thanksgiving dinner with all those relatives, or meeting his buddies for a beer at Third & Long (a Manhattan bar he owned with his brother Jim), or chatting up a pretty blonde with that smelly bag hanging around. He could cover it up with an extra-large shirt or a winter coat, but it wouldn’t go away.

So Matt Long stayed away.

“We lost Matty,” says Shane McKeon, his old running partner



from the Rock. “For a year and a half, Matty wasn’t the same guy. He wasn’t returning phone calls, he was avoiding people.”

Noel Flynn also felt a relationship changing. “Prior to the accident, we used to talk just about every day,” he says. “Then there came a time where it would take a couple days before Matt would call back. You’d lob in a call, and it would go into voice mail. I think that was his ‘why me’ time. A lot of tears. You know?”

One day Long visited a psychiatrist and ran down what was playing in his head. He listed the things he’d wanted to do with his life: run more marathons, do more triathlons, maybe get married. He said he was the guy who made sure everyone enjoyed themselves, that their glasses were filled and they went home laughing. That was Matty Long. That’s who he wanted back.

The doctor listened and then told him, “Matt, maybe instead of you trying to make everyone else feel good, you let someone make you feel good.” It sounded logical, but that’s not what Long wanted to hear. His first trip to the psychiatrist was his last.

The anguish came to a head one summer day in 2007. He met his parents for lunch at Turtle Bay Grill and Lounge, another bar he owned with Jim. Long had just been to a check-up and had learned that he might need the colostomy bag forever. He was distraught. His parents reassured him that it was just one more obstacle to overcome.

He snapped. “You know, you two are all happy because I’m alive. But I’m miserable because I’m alive,” he yelled, starting to cry. “If I had died, at least it would have been short-term pain for you. But I got to live with this every day of my life.”

Eileen Long held her breath for a moment, tears welling in her eyes. She looked over at her husband, glassy-eyed, too. Then at her crying 40-year-old son. And then she let him have it. “If you want to miss family parties and sit around in your apartment feeling sorry for yourself, go ahead. But let me ask you, Do you want to be miserable all your life?”

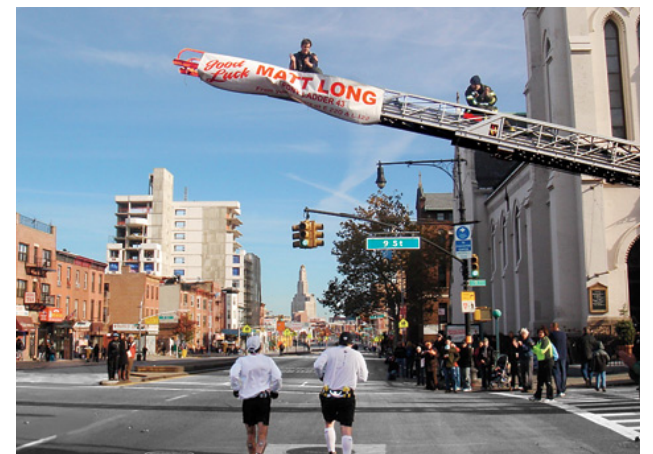
“Maybe I do,” Matt shouted back.

“Well, then be miserable, but let me tell you, you have a lot to offer people other than misery.”

But Long couldn’t see it that way. So much of his life had been taken away from him. He couldn’t be a lifesaver, a stud triathlete, a ladies man. He couldn’t be the guy who made everyone else happy. He didn’t have the bonding of the triathlon clubs, the antics with all his friends, the noble purpose and fun at the firehouse. All he had was a one-bedroom apartment where he spent so much time thinking of what used to be and what was supposed to be. “It hurt to watch everyone around me continue with their lives,” he says. “My friends were still racing and training, and one brother was having a baby and another was getting married. Their lives were moving forward and I was stuck.” Stuck—and searching for a way to be Matty Long again.



WHEN THEY APPROACH THE QUEENSBORO BRIDGE, the dark, steel-grilled link between Queens and Manhattan near mile 15, the three runners slow down. Long had planned from the start to walk the bridge, hoping not to overtax his aerobic capacity. In training, his longest run was only 14 miles.



ROAD WARRIOR

Images of Long’s 2008 marathon run (top to bottom): meeting his family in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn; getting a boost from firefighters in Park Slope; and hitting the wall in Central Park with Carino (left) and Flynn (right) by his side.



He’s quiet for most of the walk across the bridge. Every few seconds, as people race by, a runner spots him and yells, “Great job, Matty” or “Way to go, bro,” and Long yells back, “I hear ya, bro. We’ll catch up to ya soon.” Otherwise, he keeps to himself. Finally, at the 16-mile mark, as runners get set to descend a ramp into the canyons of Manhattan, he starts running again.



THE SPARK CAME IN A FLASH ONE NIGHT. IT WAS AS sudden as the alarm that would ring in his old firehouse, and he’s still not sure what prompted it. Maybe it came from a lot of

TOP TO BOTTOM: DAVID YELLEN; COURTESY NOEL FLYNN (2)



PRECIOUS MEDAL

Shortly after finishing the NYC Marathon, Long basks in his triumphant accomplishment.

little things. Maybe it was the phone calls and e-mails from Shane McKeon, who got the idea that if he trained for an Ironman, and Long could coach him, then Matty might become Matty again. "I left him one message where I said, 'If you don't want to respond to any e-mails, don't, but on a daily basis, I'll tell you where I'm at with my training and what I'm doing,'" McKeon recalls. He soon got a whiff of the old Matty. "I'll tell you, within three days he was yelling at me, 'Where's my update?'"

Or maybe it was hearing his mom in his head, and recalling what she had already been through—watching her middle-aged son lie unconscious in a hospital, not knowing if he would live or die. Years earlier, she had waited by a hospital bed to see if her husband would survive being gunned down by a mafia member outside a Brooklyn bar. Then there was the car accident a few years later that nearly killed another son, Frank. And, of course, there was 9/11, the day her two firefighting sons, Matt and Jim, didn't call home until that night to let her know they were alive. Maybe she didn't need any more misery herself.

Or maybe it was that psychiatrist. Maybe he had a point. Maybe it was time to let others make him feel good.

Maybe it was all of that, or none of that. All Long knows is that one night he was at home with his brother Eddie, "moaning and crying about everything I had wanted to do. I wanted to break three hours in the marathon. I wanted to run Boston. I wanted to do the Ironman in Hawaii. And then, I just stopped. And I remember saying to Eddie, 'You know, a lot of people want stuff. People want this, people want that. People want to win the lottery. But just because you want something doesn't mean you're

going to get it. You got to, you know, work for it.' So right there I just said, 'I will run. And I will run a marathon.'" And just like that, he started on the road back to being Matty Long.

But why a marathon? Months earlier, he'd told friends that if he were ever ready, he'd like to run with them around the Central Park loop they'd done so often. And if he could ever do those six miles, they'd go out for beer and pizza, and be happy. Now, out of nowhere, six miles had mushroomed into 26, even though he still needed crutches to walk one block. Why? "Because that's what I had done before," he said shortly after that night. "To prove that I'm back as an athlete, that's what I have to do."

He knew that if he maintained his rehab schedule, his legs, eventually, would get stronger and more stable. Lorch had said so. The colostomy bag was more troublesome. To reverse the colostomy, he would need to return to New York-Presbyterian Hospital that October for surgery. That procedure turned out to be a wrenching 14-hour ordeal, followed by a two-week hospital stay. Ultimately, though, it served its purpose.

On December 22, 2007, after two years of rehabilitation and 40 surgeries, Long traded his crutches in for a cane. Within a few days, he did his first pool workout and booked November 2, 2008, to run the New York City Marathon. He had less than 11 months to learn how to run again.



AS IT IS ON EVERY MARATHON SUNDAY IN NEW YORK, First Avenue is lined three rows deep with people, cheering and waving. Long, Carino, and Flynn aren't talking much right now, just listening. Finally, Carino says, "Can you believe this?"

"No way," says Flynn. "I don't think I ever heard it so loud."

"Incredible. And it seems like they're all cheering for Matty." Long doesn't seem to hear them.

Around 65th Street, they're joined by some members of his triathlon club, who plan to run with Long the rest of the way. Then, a few blocks later, Tom Nohilly, a trainer he's been working with, hops in with a backpack. He trails behind, and sees that Long is laboring even more than normal. His feet are barely getting off the ground, his head keeps bobbing. "Matty, push off on your feet. Use your feet," Nohilly yells. "Pump your arms."

It's not easy. Each minute on the course equates to 160 footfalls. That means the three gnarly hammer toes curving into the bottom of his left foot have already sustained at least 21,000 poundings. They'll have to endure 16,000 more if he wants to finish.

At 99th Street, just past mile 18, Long pulls off to the side of the road and points to his left foot. "It's killing me," he says. Nohilly has him lean on Carino and Flynn and then stretches out both legs and flexes his foot. "You okay, you okay?" Nohilly asks. Long sort of nods. "Okay, then, hang in there. Try to keep your shoulders and head from getting so far ahead of you."

The group trudges on. For a while the mood is upbeat and relaxed. Heading through the Bronx, *(continued on page 106)*



To watch a series of exclusive videos that chronicle Matt Long's lengthy ordeal to recover and his quest to run a marathon, visit runnersworld.com/mattlong.

A SECOND LIFE

Continued from page 96

the runners talk about how many burgers they'll devour later. As they swing back into Manhattan, in Harlem, a group of five or six teenagers are rapping on a street corner, trying to recharge the runners. Long breaks into a funky dance routine, and the others just break up laughing.

The fun evaporates near mile 22. This is where most marathoners start to wonder if they have enough left to finish, if they've prepared enough. The point when the head hurts as much as the quads. But Long isn't like the runners around him. He *couldn't* prepare enough. He only began running in March. His longest training run was 14 miles. And already, today, he's run for more than six hours, twice as long as the people passing him, on a contorted left foot that's killing him. It's attached to a leg filled with titanium that has been working double-time today because his right leg has abductor muscles that don't work. People around him are suffering, but not like him. They didn't get hit by a bus.

Flynn and Carino sense something, and they move closer to Long, making sure passing runners can't knock him over. As they enter Central Park, a wisecrack from someone gets little response from Long. With less than three miles to go, he finally barks, "No more jokes." The only noise that breaks the silence is Long grunting every few seconds.



IN FEBRUARY 2008, LONG FLEW TO Tempe, Arizona. He'd wanted to escape New York City for a while, to "someplace where people didn't know me as the guy who got hit by a bus." He'd found a rehab center that seemed suited to "getting me running."

The two trainers he worked with, Mark D'Aloisio and Kyle Herrig, use an approach that relies less on isolating individual muscles and more on getting muscle groups to work in sync. Their clients range from members of the Arizona Diamondbacks to senior citizens recovering from hip surgery. For three months the trainers put Long through daily 90-minute sessions geared at firing up dormant muscles and building strength. He also swam and lifted weights at a nearby gym. The work paid off quickly. After about six weeks, he wasn't using the cane as much, and he was putting more weight on his right leg. "His confidence was getting better," says Herrig, "and that's when we decided that we'd go out and do a little jog."

Around noon on March 14, along a canal path in Phoenix, Long, with D'Aloisio and

Herrig at his side, ran his first mile in two years. It took him 17 minutes, 24 seconds. "I can look at it two ways," he wrote in an e-mail. "It's 17:24 faster than any mile in the last two years or 1:30 slower than my best 5-K. Either way I'm running!"

A few weeks later, he returned to New York and saw Jim Wharton, a sports physiologist known for his flexibility techniques. Long wanted to be taken on as a patient. On his application, where it asked for his medical condition, he simply wrote, "Fucked." When Wharton saw that, he chuckled; the two hit it right off. Long shared his plan to run the marathon *that* fall. That's when Wharton knew the guy was serious. "It is rare to see someone with such challenges to the body come back and try the marathon. But Matt has a great attitude," Wharton said last summer. "That makes it easy. He was an athlete before he came here, and he still is."

Over the next six months, Wharton and his staff spent hour-long sessions working with Long to improve his strength and range of motion. They concentrated on his right abductors, seeing if they could get them firing again. Wharton made no promises. In case the muscles didn't respond, they made sure muscles like Long's hamstring and quads were ready to compensate. Wharton also devised a 16-week running schedule that would gradually rebuild his cardio capacity.

It began at the Rock on July 1. Long returned to active duty with the FDNY that day after two and a half years of disability leave. While hoping that he could one day get back to his old firehouse, Long was happy to be with his training buddies and shouting orders at the probies. That afternoon, he took his lunch break at a nearby track. He asked Tommy Grimshaw to join him, and the two set out for six laps. Long, who wore a new raised shoe that compensated for his shorter right leg, gimped more than he ran, but after 24 minutes he had finished the first mile-and-a-half of his marathon plan. As they walked from the track, Grimshaw laughed and said, "Matty, I can taste the Guinness we'll be drinking after the marathon."

"I hear ya, bro."

The days he didn't run, Long swam, used the elliptical, and lifted weights. His upper body became stronger and bigger than before the accident. "Hey, I'm going to be out there a long time on marathon day," he said while training one afternoon. "My arms are going to have a lot of work, too." He gradually increased his running miles. By mid-August, he hit the five-mile mark. Carino and Flynn started to join him for his longer runs. In mid-September he did *(continued on page 108)*

A SECOND LIFE

Continued from page 106

nine, and then a couple of weeks later, 14. But then, on October 3, during a scheduled 16-miler in Central Park, he felt a sharp pain in his right hip. He stopped after 11 miles, and his two friends assisted him to a cab. It turned out that he'd torn his right labrum, a ring of cartilage around the hip socket, probably due to the position of his pelvis. He iced it, treated it with herbal remedies, and cut back on the long runs as Wharton suggested.

That wasn't the only concession he made. When he first had decided to do the marathon, he expected to be with the other 38,000 runners at the start, maybe even with his firefighter buddies. But three weeks before the race, he called Dick Traum, CEO of the Achilles Track Club, which supports disabled runners. He told Traum his story, and about his injuries and his desire to run—and his wish to run with other disabled athletes. Later, he recalled the letter he had received while in the hospital, the one from the lady saying she could help him become a disabled runner. "I was pissed then," he said days before the race. "But, you know, I've come to accept that I am disabled. I'm a challenged athlete. I can't do

things that I used to do. So, yes, I'm a challenged athlete." He paused. "But if I finish the race on Sunday, I'll be an athlete again."

That meant much more than running 26 miles. It meant that he'd be back among people with whom, for so long, he shared life and its pleasures. People who ran and biked and swam for hours each day, not because they expected to win marathons or Ironmans, but simply because they loved to compete, participate, work hard—and laugh, too. Friends whom he could talk to about training plans and nutrition strategies and who didn't bug him about his different pains or his limp or his psyche. Connections from around the city and from different professions whom he could tap to help him launch his "I Will" foundation, a program he hoped would help sick or severely injured people accomplish goals they never thought achievable. Most of all, it meant he'd be back among people who saw him as a fitness junkie and not as the guy who got run over by a bus. He'd be Matty Long again.



LONG AND CARINO AND FLYNN AND the friends who've been with them since First Avenue come out of the park onto Central

Park South—there's just a half mile to go. Long is that close to saying he's an athlete again. And when that happens, perhaps he'll call someone in Boston and plead his case to let him run their race. It was on this stretch, nearly three years ago to the day, when he made his final push to qualify for Boston.

Today, he goes about 100 more yards, and suddenly stops. Flynn and Carino look at him. "You okay, Matt?" Carino asks.

For so many months, ever since that frigid December morning, people had been asking him how he was doing. *Was he okay?* And for a long time he hadn't wanted to answer them. Then he decided to run a marathon to prove to everyone—especially himself—that he was okay. No, running a marathon wouldn't make him whole again. His first step out of bed each morning would still be excruciating, as if he were "stepping on broken glass." And he would still come home each night to stacks of hospital and doctor bills, and wonder how long it might take before the outstanding lawsuits (against the bus company, the driver, and Bear Stearns) might give him some relief. No, things would never be like they were before the morning he had decided to bike to work. They would be different. And *(continued on page 111)*

A SECOND LIFE

Continued from page 108

that was okay, too. If he could just make it another half mile.

"Yeah, yeah, it's the foot," he tells Carino and Flynn. His toes can't take it any more. "Let's just walk a bit."

Walk? Now? Practically everybody who has helped Matt Long fulfill this crazy dream is either running beside him or waiting at the finish. They're here to pay back the man who was always the go-to guy for everyone else. His mom and dad are there, and all his brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. They've been tracking him all day; they want this thing done. One of his doctors, Dean Lorich, is there, too. He's brought along his wife and family—now numbering three daughters—just like he did the morning when he had to hail a cab to get to the hospital to save Long's life. Many of the top FDNY brass are waiting there, too; they want to see their latest hero come in, safely.

They'll have to wait a little bit longer, because Matt Long is walking. Flynn and Carino and the others follow his lead, for how long no one knows. He takes five, six, seven steps, until finally, like an old engine sputtering to life, he pushes off his left foot, and starts running. Everyone follows. They run the rest of Central Park South. They run through Columbus Circle. They run back into the park. There's no Boston qualifier to race for, just a finish line to reach, .2 miles away. They run tighter together; they run, it seems, a little faster. They run with smiles on their faces, closer and closer to the finish. With just yards to go, a random runner gets too close. Long shoves him aside. There won't be a collision today. With Carino on his right and Flynn on his left, he crosses the line—in 7:21:22—and hits the ground.

He reels off 10 push-ups, lifts himself up, and starts searching for all the people who helped him get back on his feet.

It doesn't take him long. There, gathered near the finish line, they're waiting for him to join them.

RUNNER'S WORLD (ISSN 0897-1706) IS PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY RODALE INC. VOLUME 44 NUMBER 3, EDITORIAL OFFICES 33 E MINOR ST, EMMAUS, PA 18098 (610-967-5171). COPYRIGHT ©2009 BY RODALE INC. POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO RUNNER'S WORLD, P.O. BOX 7307, RED OAK, IA 51591-0307. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT EMMAUS, PA, AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. IN CANADA POSTAGE PAID AT GATEWAY MISSISSAUGA, ONTARIO. CANADA POST PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NUMBER 40063752. RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADA ADDRESSES TO RUNNER'S WORLD, 2930 14TH AVE, MARKHAM, ONTARIO L3R 5Z8. GST #R122988611. SUBSCRIBERS: IF THE POSTAL AUTHORITIES ALERT US THAT YOUR MAGAZINE IS UNDELIVERABLE, WE HAVE NO FURTHER OBLIGATION UNLESS WE RECEIVE A CORRECTED ADDRESS WITHIN 18 MONTHS.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

