

Ozzie Youdell

If a grotesque caterpillar can transform itself into a stunning butterfly, can an overweight, chain smoker transform himself into a 2:29 marathoner runner? Probability would say no but ex Winnipeg native Ozzie Youdell is not about probability, he is about grit, positive thinking, perseverance and beating the odds.

His story begins in 1978 when, at the age of 26, he had a revelation that things needed to change in his lifestyle and physical condition. He weighed 195 lbs and was over a two pack a day smoker. He started by quitting smoking cold turkey. That was the easy part. A serendipitous stop at a magazine store to purchase a car magazine led to his noticing a fitness magazine cover featuring a very fit looking runner and a reference to something called a marathon. When he decided to lose weight and improve his fitness that image of the runner popped into his head and he asked his wife “what do you know about this marathon thing”? Her reply was “I don’t know much but what I do know is that people die doing it”. The weight had to go so he disregarded his wife’s warning and tried the running thing anyway. The rest, as the saying goes, was history.

His first run was in mid winter when, full of new found vim and vigour, he put on his jacket and boots and headed out the door. The run lasted to the end of his 60 foot driveway. Not an auspicious start to a fitness lifestyle. The next day he upped his distance to 120 feet, driveway out and back. That was just enough for the running bug to bite him hard and his marathon journey began.

After several years of continued commitment and 40 pounds less in bodyweight, Ozzie felt ready to tackle his first marathon, a 3 hour 49 minute effort at the 1981 Manitoba Marathon, with his wife and children watching at the finish line. Fortunately, his wife had been wrong - he didn’t die like Phidippides - he only felt like he did, as he couldn’t walk for two days after. He cherishes finishing his first marathon as the most satisfying achievement of his running life.

Over the next nine years Ozzie would run a further 21 marathons, never running one slower than the previous. His first nine marathons were between 3:49 – 3:36 and he says he felt like a “garbage runner” compared to his faster running friends, who were running under 3 hours. Then one day he got up the courage to ask a training partner “how do you run 3 hours”? His friend’s answer “you run as hard as you can then just hammer it”. So, he tried that advice in some 10K races, injured his knee and couldn’t run for over a year. When recovered and running pain free again he trained hard to break 40 minutes for a 10K and injured his plantar fascia so badly during a race, that it required surgery and another year of no running recovery. Not until his 16th marathon did his grit and determination succeed with a 2:59 performance at the 1986 Columbus Marathon. He followed this with marathons of 2:51, 2:44, and 2:41. Now the caterpillar was ready to become a butterfly.

In 1989, a job change required Ozzie to moved from Winnipeg to the small town of Thompson, in northern Manitoba. Manitoba winters are not kind to runners, but Ozzie continued to put in

consistent 100 mile weeks in his training and at the 1989 Manitoba Marathon, before his home town running buddies, the butterfly appeared and flew to a 2:33:51 marathon time. In 1990, at age 37 and a trim 136 lbs, he completed his final marathon by running 2:29:16 at the Toronto Marathon, in less than favourable conditions of 94% humidity and 24C temperatures. A remarkable journey and a testament to his indomitable spirit and powers of belief. Qualities that would be needed again later in his life.

Ozzie raced all road distances and set his personal bests in 1990 at 5K – 15:21, 10K – 31:18 and the half marathon – 1:09:36. He wasn't the only elite runner in his household though. After his first marriage ended he met and fell in love with Winnipeg native Loreen Wagner in 1988. Loreen was the Manitoba Runners' Association female runner of the year in 1988, set the Manitoba Marathon half marathon course record in 1989 at 1:21:06, and ran the '89 Twin Cities Marathon in 2:54:26. In 1993 Ozzie and Loreen relocated to the milder climate of the Okanagan Valley and the city of Vernon BC, where they continued to excel at running. In 2001, at the age of 48 and putting in 100 mile training weeks for the spring Vancouver Sun Run, Ozzie ran a February 5K road race in Kelowna BC and finished first overall in 16:02. After a slow first mile pacing a friend, he ran each of the last 2 miles at sub 5 minute pace, attesting to his incredible fitness level. A performance he is very proud of and calls this his favourite ever race.

The story of Ozzie would not be complete without mentioning his outstanding people skills. A salesman by trade with a permanent smile on his face, he easily attracts people to his effervescent personality. He has made and influenced many runner friends in the communities where he has lived. A small, close group of Winnipeg runners formed and trained together with Ozzie during the mid 80's, through their meeting in the Prairie Sky Road Runners club. Ken Perchaluk, Roman Matwyczuk, Peter Del Gallo, and Dennis Lang each achieved their own success as runners, along with Ozzie.

The years after 2001 sadly presented many health and medical challenges for Ozzie. Major depression, spinal problems and surgeries where he could barely walk with a cane, bowel surgery and a colostomy and now cancer with more major surgeries and treatments. Throughout these ordeals Ozzie has remained positive and steadfastly a runner even recovering enough, several times after long medical layoffs, to start running again, with life partner Loreen at his side. His indomitable spirit prevails as he battles an aggressive cancer and even more back surgery. He is now mostly confined to his bed each day, awaiting surgery for collapsed discs in his spine, but his love of running cannot be shaken by these difficulties. Running is part of his life force and being, as it was meant to be.