

Boston Strong

A long-term AIDS survivor on running in the Boston Marathon a year after the bombing.

May 2, 2014 By Stephen Kovacev



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Winning this medal represents not only crossing the finish line of the 118th Boston Marathon in 2014, but a recognition by each of this year's runners of the sacrifices that last year's marathon brought on.

Boston holds the world's oldest annual modern day marathon. Runners aspire to participate in this legendary marathon. Growing up in Boston, I took pride in this celebrated annual rite of spring. Little did I know that in 1997, after coming back from near death, I would become the first person with full-blown AIDS to complete the Boston Marathon.

Back then, my doctors advised me that running the marathon would be too much stress on my already weakened immune system. But I needed to transcend the impact the disease had had on me, claiming my two lovers Kevin and Michael, and many others. I had to run a marathon again to somehow reclaim my life and give me something more than doctor appointments, sickness and funerals to focus on. Finishing that 1997 marathon had given me just that. But how could this year's runners transcend the tragic event of what had happened last year and reclaim the spirit of the Boston Marathon?

How would the new security changes affect this year's race? These were some of the changes runners would be facing. There would be no convenience of checking in a personal bag before the start of the race in Hopkinton, no backpacks, handbags, glass containers, no container with more than 1 liter of liquid, no personal hydration systems, no costumes covering the face or bulky outfits. The enhanced security changed parking arrangements. There was a large presence of local, state and federal law enforcement. State and local 10-wheel dump trucks blocked the streets leading to the starting line and the finishing line areas.

In the Athletes' Village, looking around at the thousands of runners who were stretching, milling and lying about, I was sure everyone had last year on their minds, but no one seemed to be talking about it. The atmosphere was emotionally charged because of the importance of this Boston Marathon. There were no special instructions given in case the race was stopped. Fear did not permeate the atmosphere.

I found a place to stretch out before the race next to a female runner from Pennsylvania. This would be her first Boston Marathon. She had planned on running it before the bombing that happened last year. Because I would turn 60, I had also planned to run in this year's marathon before what had happened. My friend Erik from Denver, whom I had met in 2010 in Athens to commemorate the 2,500th Anniversary of

the Marathon, told me that he was running this year after reading [my story](#) about being in last year's race. Whatever the reasons were for the 36,000 runners running this year, we now had all come together for one reason: to show our support for those who had lost their lives and limbs, and reclaim this Marathon.

Before I knew it, the starting gun went off and we were running towards Boston. The day was filled with blue skies and we were all feeling the heat from the warm day. Sometime into the race this surreal feeling came over me that I was no longer in my body and my fellow runners were not in their bodies. Our feet were hardly touching the ground, as if we were moving in unison. As if we knew each other before. The roar of the spectators filled our senses most of the route.

There were young children eager to pass a runner a slice of orange, banana or cup of water. I was uplifted more by the glee in the eyes of a young girl and the love she exuded than the slice of orange she was offering me. My emotions would ebb and flow during the race. Especially when I would see runners with names written on their bibs and shirts of those who had lost their lives. Some runners had their 2013 bib numbers pinned on their backs. I was wondering how I was going to feel running past the spot where my fellow runners and I were stopped.

And there it was. My emotions stirred up again as I reached the spot on Commonwealth Avenue where I was preparing to go down into the underpass tunnel beneath Massachusetts Avenue and had been stopped. But this year all of a sudden I heard my name being yelled out. My friend Lisa and her friend were calling me from behind the barrier. Did she know that was the spot that I had been stopped? Tears of joy flowed. We hugged and I went on to the finish.

Everyone who ran the race that day had to be a winner for the fact that out of the cowardice of the two brothers who were responsible for the bombing, a phrase, a thought, a bond, a unity, the rallying cry, arose to the sky—Boston Strong.

[Stephen Kovacev](#) was diagnosed with AIDS in 1992. The Massachusetts resident thought he was on his deathbed in 1996, but he eventually recovered. To honor his dead friends and to prove there is life after an AIDS diagnosis, Kovacev ran the Boston Marathon in 1997 and he has done so regularly ever since. He is currently writing a book titled *Soul of the Phoenix*, which is expected to be published in 2014. [Click here](#) to read his thoughts about running in the 2013 Boston Marathon.

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