

Sports Unlimited: The gait hasn't closed

by Don Norcross

Josh Cox is tired of the questions.

"When are you racing again? Why haven't you raced?"

Then there's the not-so-subtle, is-he-done dig.

"How old are you, 36?"

Cox is 31, typically a marathoner's prime.

SHORELINE RUN - The San Diego shoreline provides a scenic backdrop for Josh Cox during a recent training run. CNS Photo by John Gastaldo.

Problem is, the Christian High (San Diego) product hasn't raced a marathon in more than three years. His 2:13:55 personal best came nearly 6 1/2 years ago.

So the questions linger.

"Where have you been?"

A myriad of factors - a reality TV pursuit, injury, his brother's wedding and his late father's battle with cancer - have kept Cox from racing.

He had plans to enter the Los Angeles Marathon on March 4, primarily as a 13- to 18-mile training run or perhaps go the distance, hoping to meet the 2-hour, 22-minute Olympic Trials qualifying standard. But after recovering from a recent stomach illness, he chose to pull out, saving his legs for another marathon in the coming weeks.

But the clock is ticking, with the Olympic Trials set for Nov. 3 in New York.

Either way, this isn't the future many predicted for Cox when in 2000, at 24, he was the youngest qualifier at the marathon Olympic Trials.

Cox's former coach, Kevin McCarey, thinks Cox has mismanaged his career and that his best days are behind him.

"Some people learn from their lessons," said McCarey, himself a former 2:13 marathoner. "He never learned from his lessons. His running ended a long time ago."

From a training perspective, McCarey offers three main criticisms of Cox: that he logged far too many miles; that he ran too much by himself; and that he let himself be coached by Italy's Dr. Gabriele Rosa, who often went months without seeing Cox train.

"Yeah, I did too many miles," admitted Cox, who once racked up consecutive weeks of 188, 186, 175 and 172 miles, at altitude. "That was five years ago. I've learned."

To a degree, it pains McCarey to be so critical of Cox.

"As a human being, he's one of the most quality people I've ever met on this planet," McCarey said. "Just a very loving human being."

Yet McCarey's criticism doesn't stop with Cox's training.

"He got into other things. You can't get into other things if you're a marathoner, if you want to be one of the best," McCarey said. "You have to devote yourself to it, and he didn't."

At the Boston Marathon expo in 2004, 10 weeks after finishing seventh at his second Olympic Trials, Cox passed on the race but participated in an unusual publicity event, setting the world record for the fastest marathon on a treadmill (2:31:04).

In November 2004, Cox skipped the New York City Marathon to appear on ABC's "The Bachelorette." He said he met guys on the show who remain some of his best friends and doesn't regret the decision.

"No," said Cox, "I wouldn't change that at all."

A foot injury prevented him from running a spring 2005 mara- thon.

In October 2005, Cox planned on running the Twin Cities Marathon, then passed when he realized it was on the same day as his brother's wedding. Cox stood as his brother's best man.

"I could just imagine giving the best-man's toast on a cell phone from some airport and getting the Worst Brother of the Year Award," Cox joked.

A month later, in November 2005, Cox's father, Donald, was diagnosed with cancer. Cox described his relationship with his father until then as "tumultuous." The oldest of three boys, with three older sisters, Cox said his father could be painfully critical of him, sometimes in front of others.

"You're kind of walking on eggshells thinking, 'What does my father really think of me?'" Cox said. "I just wanted to know that he was proud of me."

For the next nine months, until his father died in July, Cox put running on hold, spending as much time as possible with his father.

He stayed by his father's side for weeks when Donald underwent chemotherapy in Houston. Back in San Diego, father and son regularly shared time over coffee and lunch.

Cox and his father both loved U2.

They were in the car together one day when U2's "Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own" came on:

"We fight all the time, you and I

That's all right, we're the same soul"

Cox's father put his hand on Josh's knee after the first line, then told his son, "Not anymore."

"My dad became one of my best friends," Cox said. "And I became his. He opened up in ways he never had before."

Sitting over lunch recently at a San Diego restaurant, eating soup on a cold, blustery day, Cox described the three years since his last marathon as "a real whirlwind."

To those who criticize his decisions, he said, "I would invite them to walk a mile in my shoes," adding, "I wouldn't do one thing differently. I wouldn't risk missing my brother's wedding. I would never trade being by my father's side and forgoing serious training for nine months. There are things more important than running and my career. My dad and my brother are two of those things."

Cox weighed 172 pounds shortly after his father died. Back to training, he's down to his usual weight, 152. He is planning some changes. His home in Murrieta, Calif., is on the market. When it sells, he'd like to move to Portland, Ore., and train with his friend, Dan Browne, who qualified for the 2004 Olympics in the 10,000

meters and marathon.

A devout Christian, Cox said there was a time in the past two years when he asked himself if running really matters.

"It matters because it's a gift entrusted by God," he said. "To bury my talent is to hold the creator in contempt."

To McCarey or anyone else who thinks he's squandered his gift, Cox said, "I know I haven't run my best time. I know I can run 2:09. I've never been more focused or more motivated. I'll get there, I know for certain."

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