

Local Runner Curtis Taylor: a Man of Vision

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RECREATION

Runners must endure unimaginable challenges in preparation for a marathon. Many must rise and train in darkness or by the dusky near-light of twilight or pre-dawn. For four-time marathoner Curtis Taylor of Carrboro, the road before him remains in darkness well after the break of day. Partially blind since childhood and totally without sight since his late teens, Taylor, now 42, is clearly visionary, with a bright sense of optimism that lights the way for so many who have come to know and train with him.

Training and running in races alongside partners who offer a sense of guidance, the Duke University economics professor doesn't merely get by with a little help from his friends—he sets a winning pace that motivates those around him to be at their very best. “He’s awesome—a total inspiration,” said Cardinal Track Club member and training partner Rona Van Willigen. “Honestly, if he wasn’t such an interesting person to talk to and so inspiring, he wouldn’t have so many people willing to guide him. He really tries to get to know people and become their friends.”

A Sound Performance

A 3:17:20 finisher at last fall’s Richmond Marathon, Taylor posted a 3:20 just 10 days ago at the Outer Banks Marathon (OBX), reflecting what might have been an even greater accomplishment than Richmond considering the elements.

“He ran around a 3:20,” said Cardinal Track Club co-founder Bobby Biles, who is the co-owner of Carrboro’s Fleet Feet Sports with Van Willigen. “What he didn’t know—and a lot of people didn’t know, I guess—is that there’s about four miles of off-road running on a trail. That made about four miles of it pretty difficult for him.”

“And it wasn’t a great course,” said Dick Forbis, who co-founded Cardinal with Biles. “It was completely flat, which actually makes it harder for anyone to run. You need variation in the terrain. But 3:20 was a wonderful time out there, given the terrain and pouring rain”

“There were four miles of trails,” Taylor said. “Three miles weren’t so bad because they were just on this dirt road, but the last mile went through some woods, and there were roots and rocks. I went into the woods a minute ahead of my pace, and I came out of the woods a minute and a half behind my pace.”

Heavy rains during the race also hindered his progress, as the noise drowned out the patter of his running partners’ footsteps, a reassuring rhythm to Taylor’s ballad.

“You sort of learn to listen to their feet, so it’s harder in a wind,” he said. “When I was running in the Outer Banks Marathon last Sunday, we had a monsoon for the last ten miles, and that was difficult. I couldn’t hear my partner’s feet.”

Still, after running twice in Houston, the OBX was only slightly slower than Taylor’s personal best at Richmond.

“This is the first one I’ve run where I didn’t hit the wall, though,” Taylor said. “I didn’t feel completely destroyed. I’ve been running with Jay Crooker’s marathon training program, and he’s really good.”

Into the Darkness

Taylor said he remembers little of his early sighted years.

“I had a childhood disease,” he explained. “I saw perfectly until I was two-and-a-half, but I don’t remember it, of course. It makes a big difference, though. There are a lot of concepts there that it would be hard for someone who’s blind from birth to grasp.”

Through the early childhood years, Taylor’s sight was on the steady decline.

“I could ride a bicycle until I was about 10,” he said. “It was just pretty much bright lights and basic body shapes until I was around 19, when I had a corneal transplant. Then my retina became detached. When I received that corneal transplant, it became clear to me just how much information I don’t have.”

“I don’t even see light and dark anymore,” he said. “Nothing at all.”

As Taylor hits the concrete in his running shoes now, he now sees the landscape before him in a sense, but not in terms of concrete and absolutes.

“I visualize running,” he said, “but it’s a very conceptual visualization.”

Taylor’s dance with running began early on, however.

“I ran in high school, but I was never that competitive,” he said. “I stopped when I was (an undergraduate) at the University of Washington, but then I started up again when I was in graduate school at Yale.”

Before arriving at Duke seven years ago, Taylor rediscovered running during his nine-years of teaching at Texas A&M in College Station, TX.

In Texas, there’s little else to do,” he said, laughing. “Running a long way didn’t seem like such a bad idea. I ran the Houston Marathon twice while I was there.”

Taylor’s daughter Rhianna, 16, also seems to have inherited father’s running prowess. The East Chapel Hill High (ECHHS) student runs hurdles on the track team and is a goalie on the field hockey team. Taylor’s son Austin, 14, is an ECHHS freshman, and, Nathan, 11, is a student at Phillips Middle School.

The Companionship of the Long Distance Runner

While most would typify long distance runners as lonelier, self-motivated sorts, Taylor depends on a company of friends who love the miseries of marathon training.

“It was difficult until recently, when I got hooked up with the Cardinal Track Club,”

Taylor said. “It’s been an amazing experience for me. I’m used to having one or two running partners, but there are probably 10 people I can call now. The only down side is that you have to build up a reasonable amount of chemistry with somebody. I have to get used to running with folks a little bit.”

“He started in Jay (Crooker’s) marathon training program (last fall),” Van Willigen explained. “He got in touch with Jay and told him that the only way he could do it would be to have some people guide him. Jay sent the email out, and a group of us responded that we’d be fine with it. His pace is almost the same as mine, so I figured I could help with some of the runs, especially on the track.”

A 3:15 marathon pace isn’t for everyone, however.

“He’s not overtly driven,” Forbis said. “He’s casual and glad to run with anyone, but he needs to run at a faster pace. I’ve run with him a couple of times before it became clear that he needed to train at a faster pace than I wanted to train at.”

Whether on roads or on UNC's Belk Track, partnering with Taylor isn't comprised of constant contact and guidance. Rather, a self-contained "bubble" of personal space acts as a sort of tether between another runner and Taylor.

"We'll sort of bump into each other," Van Willigen said, "and if he starts to drift off, I'll sort grab his arm and pull him in. Some folks will do more verbal guiding, and they'll say, 'More to the left, or more to the right.'"

When road training with Taylor, Van Willigen said they usually stick to safer, less-trafficked streets.

"It's easier to take him on bike lanes or on side streets where it's not going to be as crowded," she said. "Sidewalks, with all of the (uneven) dips, can be tricky. If you're on an even road or in a bike lane where there's not much traffic, pretty much all you have to do is run next to him. We just sort of stay on his left side and stay in that bubble."

"Rona calls it running in the bubble. She doesn't really hold onto me; she sort of runs beside me. She used to grab ahold of me at the corners, but now she just yells at me: 'Left! I said left!'"

Guiding Taylor along bicycle lanes has evoked the misguided indignation of the some cyclists, however, who typically approach Taylor and running partners from behind and can't see that Taylor is blind.

"We've had cyclists getting mad at him, and Rona's yelling, 'Um, he's blind?'" Biles said.

"Yeah, there are some pretty aggressive cyclists out there," Taylor said, chuckling. "I don't know what to say except, 'Hey, I'm blind. Cut me a little slack.'"

Seeing the Future

Taylor's comfort in his own skin makes him an easy partner.

"He's funny about things," Van Willigen said. "There are times when I haven't been paying attention, and he'll almost bonk into a telephone pole or a mailbox. He just sort of laughs about it."

Taylor is keenly aware that his blindness imposes limits on what challenges he can take on, however.

“It happens,” he said, laughing. “I actually went hiking at Pilot Mountain a couple of years ago. There’s a lot of scrambling over rocks. At some point, I just decided, ‘Okay, I’m just going to sit here and let everybody else hike around the mountain.’ I suppose I could have done it, but it just wasn’t fun, so there wasn’t much point in doing it.”

Though his marathon time qualifies him to run in the Boston Marathon next spring, his teaching responsibilities at Duke may preclude a run at Boston in 2007. Nor does Taylor currently have plans to push the envelope farther than the standard marathon distance into the world of ultra-running.

“This is just the first time I’ve run 26.2 without falling apart,” he said, chuckling. “Maybe when that distance becomes run of the mill, I’ll up the ante.”

This is not to say that Taylor is resting on his laurels either.

“I have half an idea to try a triathlon someday,” he said. “I have a tandem bicycle, and I’d have to do the biking on that, and I’m not sure how I’d manage the swim, but I’ve mentioned it to Jay Crooker, so maybe he’ll come up with some ideas.”

Visionary

Curtis Taylor is aware of his limitations, but Taylor doesn’t dwell in that darkness—his way is illuminated and steered by the unseen promise of things yet to be endeavored. This Duke Professor, marathoner, and father of three has as clear a perspective on life as anyone.

“It’s really a question of how you want to live your life,” Taylor said. “You can sit on your butt and let the world pass you by, or you can go out and take some risks.”

Those sharing roads, bike lanes, trails, and race courses with Taylor might take heed. He quite possibly possesses the clearest view of the finish line right from the start.