

The good race

By Ned Rozell

As we rolled through the parking lot, 100 steps from the grassy field where the Equinox Marathon ends and begins, the starting cannon boomed. It was not the first time I had arrived late for the Equinox start, but everything else was different that morning. My little blondie, 3-year old Anna, was there with me. She was in her Chariot stroller, with a blanket over her feet.

I was following a compulsion to do the race any way possible. With Anna's mom, Kristen, up ahead in the pack, and us with no babysitter, the Chariot was a means for me to cover the miles. Expecting a 3-year-old to sit still for nine hours was nuts, and selfish, but I wanted to honor my lifetime bib. And I wanted to share the experience with my little girl, because my Equinox Marathon memories (including first meeting Kristen at the race) go back half my life.

With smoke curling from the cannon, the crowd bobbed up the hill ahead of us. I suppressed a comical urge to pass people, and shoved the Chariot up the first steep hill of the Equinox. My eyes watered while ascending the old UAF ski slope, a bit overwhelmed that I was healthy/lucky/alive enough to again run the race.

Twenty-one years earlier, I had started up this same hill in a T-shirt and nylon shorts. I wished I had more insulation when it snowed on Ester Dome that day, but I made 'er home in 4 hours, 18 minutes. Not a great time, but at that moment it was the most impressive thing I had ever done.

I've run this race most of the years I've lived here, with an intact streak since 2001. I was trained up for my best ever time in 2000. But then my dad died that August, and I was back East during race time. Since then, I've thought of him, and the tennis tiger who was my mom, during the hours it takes me to cover the 26.2 miles up, on and over Ester Dome. That's the part where I get misty, and thankful my carcass can still move that far.

On this chilly September morning, it was time to show my girlie the miles that are such a part of my life. I'm not sure if Anna will be a runner, or even an athlete, but she was going to see the crowd that comes out to cheer everybody on beneath the yellow and orange trees, wrinkle her nose at the musk of highbush cranberries, and feel the heartfelt smiles and hand slaps of the old friends we passed on the out-and-back. She would breathe in the spirit of the day.



Photo courtesy of Ned Rozell.

As we climbed up the big hill through spruce and aspen, another Equinox memory nudged me. There, in my mind's eye, was Paco, a friend from college, sitting down right there on the trail, eating berries, resting for another push with a punchy smile on his face. He was trying to once again complete the race without training. Paco, a UAF photography student from Mexico, loved the Equinox. Learning of his murder in Fairbanks one day in October almost 20 years ago was some of the most shocking news I've ever received. I thought of him — that gentle, smiling soul — and mouthed another *thank you for my blessings*.

The richest blessing was the little girl with me. She entered the scene a few years ago, blowing the walls off the me-centered box I'd constructed and maintained for 43 years. With her, everything was new again, from the hoot of a great horned owl to the crunch of little boots on fresh snow.

The miles with Anna did not drag that day. She napped, she walked some, she never complained and she looked forward to the cookies at the aid stations before devouring them.

Nine hours into that glorious day, with Anna on my shoulders as we closed in on the finish line, a woman ran past us. We had seen her before, several times; she had been checking on friends who, like us, were the true back of the pack. As she had several times before, the woman yelled words of encouragement. They were the perfect summation of our new, extra-slow and extra-meaningful version of the Equinox.

"Watching you two today has been beautiful." ■

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Ned and Anna Rozell show off their finisher's patch after completing the 2009 Equinox Marathon.