

The Two Trials of Emily LeVan

Emily faces challenges on and off the course

By Candace Karu

As featured in the April 2008 issue of Running Times Magazine

Emily LeVan is a woman who embraces challenges, a woman whose life has been defined by her capacity for hard work and her willingness to push the boundaries of her endurance. As an undergraduate at Bowdoin College she was named an All American field hockey player. While there she also set and still holds the record for 400 meters. After spending five months with her husband, Brad Johnson, hiking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in 2001, LeVan returned to school to get her nursing degree, which she completed after giving birth to their daughter Madeline in 2004. She has twice been the top American finisher at the Boston Marathon (2005 and 2006) and is one of a handful of women who has met the A qualifying standard for the 2008 Olympic trials.

Since 1998, when she ran her first marathon hoping to qualify for Boston, LeVan has determinedly followed a path with few detours or distractions, a path that has taken her from talented amateur to elite professional in less than a decade. Like many high level runners who have full-time careers, LeVan has had to manage the often-conflicting demands of work, family, and training. It is not unusual for LeVan to follow a 22-mile long run on Sunday with a 12-hour shift in the ER. But because she has always felt balanced and fulfilled by her work at the hospital, her family and her training, LeVan rarely felt overwhelmed.

All that changed on November 5, 2007, when LeVan and Johnson were told that their daughter, Maddie, then 3, had Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL). The family spent the next 10 days at the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at the Maine Medical Center in Portland. "Our world was completely turned upside down," LeVan says. "We learned that we were embarking on a new kind of marathon; one that, if all goes well, will last the next two to three years."

During the first tumultuous weeks after Maddie's diagnosis, LeVan discarded all thoughts of training for the trials, thinking neither she nor her husband could spare the time and energy away from their daughter and her struggle. Later, as the family got into the rhythm of Maddie's treatment, which includes weekly trips from the farm where they live in Wiscasset to Maine Med or to the Maine Children's Cancer Program (MCCP) clinic, they decided that LeVan would continue to train for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Realizing that this uniquely difficult time could become something greater than an opportunity for LeVan to fulfill a personal dream, the family found a way to make the months before the Olympic trials a chance to raise awareness as well as much-needed funds for the Maine Children's Cancer Program. To this end they created a fundraiser to run alongside Emily LeVan's preparation for the trials. Their goal is to raise \$52,400 - 26.2 x 2 - in the months between January 18 and April 20. Every dollar raised will go to the MCCP and the programs they provide for families of children with cancer. A fundraising website (www.twotrials.org) will give people the opportunity to follow LeVan's progress as she trains for the trials and Maddie's as she progresses through her treatment.

The concept of charity runners has a rich and often controversial history in the running community. As an elite athlete LeVan brings a unique perspective to the discourse. "I admire people that can set goals for themselves and achieve those goals--whatever the motivation may be," she states. "I also greatly appreciate the passion that people have for causes. I know that both my husband, Brad, who is an insulin-dependent diabetic, diagnosed in 2000, and Maddie would not be alive today if it were not for organizations like the American Diabetes Association, Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society Team in Training."

Like most of the top U.S. women marathoners, LeVan's trial will end at the finish line of the historic Boston Marathon course on April 20. Maddie's finish line is much further away. But if she is anything like her mother, she will surely be up to the challenge.

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