



*John Healy is still an elite athlete – just one with asthma.*

# SECOND WIND

by JOHN C. HEALY

I have always been active. I played all kinds of sports as a kid growing up in Toronto. I was a serious swimmer and rep hockey player in high school and played varsity lacrosse during university. As an adult, my passion for physical excellence became more focused and serious – in my search for the next great adrenaline rush. First it was triathlons, then Ironman races. I began competing in ultramarathons, culminating three years ago with a 280-kilometre run in the Chilean desert. I threw myself into high-altitude mountaineering and scaled mountains all over the world, including two of the world's Seven Summits (the highest peak on each continent). After that, I decided to stay closer to home, to see what I could do if I focused seriously on my running.

Today, I'm 46 years old, a father of two teenagers, and a guy who works too many hours as a crown attorney in Toronto. It was the summer of 2007, when I'd just

returned from a three-year sabbatical teaching law in New York, that I took up road racing with a vengeance. I've done quite well at it, considering everything.

I'd had little time to invest in things like figuring out why my breathing was always laboured, my chest hurt, and I was continuously coughing up crud. Through all my adventures I had a nagging feeling that my performances – whether in the pool, the desert, on the bike, in the mountains or on the track – were not reaching full potential. In 2005, I asked my family physician about this, and he dismissed my symptoms as a cold. So I just trained harder and adopted the mantra: "Never quit".

As I pushed myself in the next few years, my coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, mucus production and shortness of breath became more pronounced. My racing, and my daily quality of life, started to suffer. I finally paid a visit to the asthma centre at Toronto Western Hospital last

year. Following spirometry testing, I wasn't surprised to be formally diagnosed with asthma.

Still, nothing could quite prepare me for this news. I felt fear, confusion, anxiety and relief all at once. The doctor spent considerable time explaining what the implications of asthma would be for me – as a father, a lawyer and mostly, as an athlete. He told me how during an asthma attack, a person's bronchial tubes become inflamed and the airways narrow, restricting airflow. I learned that awareness of my asthma and its triggers, avoidance of these triggers, and proper use of medications were essential to controlling symptoms. He told me that, with proper management, I could have a normal, healthy lifestyle, which included running and all my other "obsessions".

I am now an athlete with asthma. The hardest part of my new reality is remembering to use my puffers as directed (two puffs of Symbicort in the morning, two at night. Ventolin as required). I think part of me still refuses to acknowledge that I need the medication to control my asthma, but the smarter side of me knows that without it, I could be in trouble. It took a serious lecture from the doctor on my follow-up appointment to realize I *had* to follow the schedule, or else I'd find myself in an emergency room, instead of on the track.

It was weird telling people I have asthma. Most responded with disbelief, since I've always pushed my physical limits, with no apparent "disability". Explaining that asthma is not a disability and can be controlled made me realize that I could turn this diagnosis into something positive.

Through a combination of really hard work and daily use of my puffer, I have won several races outright this year and set new personal best times for 3 km (9:36), 5 km (16:50) and 10 km (35:18) distances. I am training for the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon at the end of September. The Asthma Society of Canada is one of the official charities, and I'm asking people to make a pledge for me (or one of the others on the Asthma Society team). We need to spread the message that asthma control is not only possible, but that this disease should not stop anyone from living – or racing – to their fullest potential.

*To support John in the marathon, go to: [www.torontowaterfrontmarathon.com/en/charity/asthma.htm](http://www.torontowaterfrontmarathon.com/en/charity/asthma.htm)*