

# Fiona in Focus

## Rhonda Foulds becomes a "marathon maniac" while coping with Parkinson's Disease



If runners in the Metroplex were asked to pick the perfect ambassador for their sport, there is a good chance they might pick Rhonda Foulds, who with her radiant smile and infectious laugh somehow makes running look effortless and fun. She always appears to be having the time of her life and never exhibits any of the pain often associated with marathon running. I have to admit that on several occasions she has almost inspired me to sign up for another marathon... almost.



For Foulds, a member of the group, "marathon maniacs," knocking out 26.2 miles is something she could do in her sleep. Yet, until a few years ago she was barely able to jog from one light pole to the next. Although she had been a runner in high school and college, a busy life raising three sons had forced her to take a break for several years.

In 1999 she began experiencing some unusual symptoms. Her neck was stiff, she was experiencing tremors in her jaw, eye and right hand. She had restless legs and couldn't sleep. Shortly afterward she received a devastating diagnosis -- she had Parkinson's Disease. Foulds was in shock. She had always thought that this disease only affected old people and had no idea what the future might hold.

She took one day at a time and joined a PD support group but did not make any drastic changes to her life until about 10 years later in June 2009. After seeing an unflattering photo of herself, she decided that drastic action was required and that she needed to take steps to regain her health. She immediately threw out all the junk food in the house and committed to walking 30 minutes every day. Her son, Zachary, home on leave from the Marines, accompanied her on her walk one day and gave her the push she needed.

"He said 'Mom, when was the last time you ran? Well, let's try a little.' So, he got me to run from one light pole to the next and it felt so good that I knew I was onto something. On the way home that day, we saw a sign for a 5K in Haslet in October, called the Haslet Hustle 5K. That would be my first ever race. I used the coach to 5K program and never missed a single workout. I ran the 5K in 34 minutes. I ran the entire race."

Parkinson's research has shown that those suffering from the disease can benefit from a regular exercise program. Rhonda is living proof that this is the case, although it is doubtful that many people are quite as enthusiastic as she is! In December 2011, she ran her first marathon at White Rock in Dallas. That was all it took for her to become a 'marathon junkie.' She has since run more than 32 marathons and has a PR of 4:26. Asked about the appeal of the distance, she explained it was partly the chance to connect with friends while doing something good for herself and partly the opportunity to face and overcome what many consider a tough physical challenge. While running she manages to distract herself from the pain and suffering by goofing off with friends or allowing her mind to wander and contemplate family, friends, her dogs and even music and math.

She acknowledges the importance of support from fellow runners and friends like Elizabeth Mendiola who, like Foulds, willingly embraces the marathon challenge. Apparently these crazy athletes sometimes feel that 26.2 miles in a weekend is not enough. "We ran three half marathons within 24 hours last November and we were so tired by the end that we were super silly and laughing at everything. One of the races was a total disaster and

we've had several laughable moments about that."

When asked about how Parkinson's affects her daily routine, Foulds explained, "There are days when I get up and I look like the tin man moving around my house. I have to get up plenty early in order to get ready for races on weekends to give myself time to adjust and for my medication to work. I do have pain in my muscles, due to PD, but I have learned to ignore much of it and keep moving forward. I have learned the difference between PD pain and the pain of an injury."

Unlike some Parkinson's sufferers, she is fortunate that she does not need to rely on medication to get her through the day. "Before I had deep brain stimulation in 2004, I was taking 33 medications per day. Currently I am only taking two Sinemet tablets per day right before bed and first thing in the morning to get me moving."

In addition to logging an average of 40-45 miles per week, Foulds cross trains by lifting weights and cycling. She also stays active volunteering at the SPCA, her local elementary school, and at several local races.

Her goals for this year are ambitious by anyone's standards.

In April she will run her third Boston Marathon with her guide and friend, Carol Murray, to support Medtronic Global Heroes, a group that supports athletes who continue to run after their diagnosis. In August she will take part in the Pike's Peak Ascent, a 13-mile adventure that takes place in Manitou Springs, Colorado.

Last year, Foulds participated as an individual in the Run the Edge Challenge with a goal of running 2,015 miles in 2015. She exceeded that number and logged a total of 2,176 miles. This year, she is undertaking a similar challenge with two friends as Team Sloth with the goal of running 2,016 miles in 2016. Foulds personally plans to run somewhere between 1,700 and 2,000 miles. Looking at everything she has accomplished over the past few years the name 'sloth' seems completely inappropriate. She is a warrior and an inspiration.