

How I “Won” The 2011 5th Ave Mile

As we warmed up behind the starting line of the 2011 5th Ave Mile, I silently observed my competitors but struggled to register who they were. I couldn't put names to faces, personal bests to personalities. I hadn't felt like this since the first day of Kindergarten. Fortunately, even though I felt like the new guy, I didn't feel completely out of place. Somewhere, deep down inside of me, I strongly believed I was where I was supposed to be.

On this particular day in my life I believed something very few believed—that I would win this prestigious race. I had the audacity to believe this not because I was arrogant and reckless, but rather, because my unlikely journey to this moment convinced me that anything was possible. I had waited more than three years for this moment. In my heart, I knew I would win on this day. I would become victory personified...

And as I crossed the finish line not in first or second or third place, but in 6th place I was joyful. I had achieved what I set out to do. I had won the 5th Ave Mile, the most prestigious mile in the world. I know what you must be thinking at this point in my story, ‘You didn't win the race. In fact you weren't even close.’ My only response to that astute observation is that there were two races occurring at once, one you could see and one you couldn't. The race you could see I didn't win. The race you couldn't see, the race within the race, the race within myself, that race I did win.

I know it's a weird thing to say I won a race when I obviously didn't. The results speak for themselves, don't they? For me, however, on that day, there was so much more happening than just a foot race down 5th Ave. If you could see what I felt inside at a pivotal moment in that race you would know exactly what I mean when I say that I did win a race that day... just not the one everyone could see.

During my three year journey to this year's race I had been considered MIA from the competitive racing scene. This disappearance began not too long after the 2008 US Olympic Trials. Within months of the conclusion of this momentous event in my life I began a spiral down into the treacherous-depths of my own soul. I would spend nearly three years looking for myself, assuming different roles in life in search of the role that made the most sense for me to assume. It would take three years of living as someone I was not before I could realize I was always meant to be a world-class runner.

From 2009 until mid-2011 I raced sporadically, lived in three different cities, took on three totally different occupations, and represented three different sponsors. I did all this while dealing with the discovery that I'm living with the terminal kidney disease known as focal segmental glomerulosclerosis or FSGS.

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Over the past three years I worked as a waiter at Denny’s in downtown San Diego, as a desk clerk at The Lafayette Health Club in San Francisco and finally as a pre-school teacher at Bright Star Kids Academy in Seattle, Washington. I discovered sides of myself and the world while living and working in these very different cities at these very different jobs.

The life I was living in each city was a life I could see myself living for a long time. Each city and each job offered a sense of peace and contentment. And at the time, that was enough to make me consider never coming back to competitive racing. And yet, even though I could see myself as a waiter or a desk clerk or a teacher, I still felt those lives were too small for the dreams that I still had. These were dreams that wouldn’t lie dormant with just good enough. Thus, I moved not in search of happiness but rather, in answer to destiny’s calling...

Fast forward to 500 meters to go in the 2011 5th Ave Mile and I emerge from the pack to assume the lead...and I begin to push the pace—hard. Keep in mind my new Coach, Troy Samuels, had asked me to wait a lot longer before making this move. He believed if I waited long enough, when I did move I could possibly pull off a miraculous victory. I heeded his words only until destiny’s voice became too loud to ignore, pushing me to move as soon as an opportunity presented itself.

What many people observed at this point in the race was the Jon Rankin of old not settling for a slow paced race; a Jon Rankin unafraid to make the pace honest at the detriment of possible victory. That’s definitely what it looked like, but that’s not what was really happening. In that very moment the crowd fell silent, the field of competitors disappeared, the cameras no longer existed and only two men remained: the man I once was and the man I had finally realized I had always been (and was now ready to be).

In a single race there are always two races happening simultaneously: the one without and the one within. I was running two 5th Ave Miles that day and for a moment I was winning both. As I pulled away from the field of real runners I was winning the race everyone could see. And as I pulled away from the field of runners I was also pulling away from the old me. My move to the front was not just an assertion to establish myself as a potential winner to the world watching, it was to firmly declare for myself that I now know who I am and I’m going to start being that person now, without fear or trepidation.

I did win the 2011 5th Ave Mile. And if anyone had asked me how I, little known, long forgotten Jon Rankin, now stood the fastest on that course amongst the greats I would have only the briefest of explanations. I would tell them that my hiatus didn’t yield insight into new, improved training, or that it was some discovery about running that led to such dramatic improvement. I would admit that I was lost after not making the 2008 US Olympic team; and that I didn’t know

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why I would try for another Olympic team or how I would go about doing so if I did find a reason to try again.

I would tell them that I had stopped living life when I began chasing the “Olympic Dream” because somewhere along the way I lost sight of who I am. And it was only when I stopped chasing the dream that I could start to catch up on the rest of my life, a life I had put on hold since the age of 15. I would tell them I needed to experience life and chase myself before I could decide whether it was still right for me to chase the dreams I’ve had for more than half my life.

And after finally giving myself time to fall in-love, and to experience real heartbreak, to struggle in the “real” world working many different 9-5’s and looking a place to call home, I finally found myself. Finding myself and realizing who I am meant to be now has set me free to run after my dreams without inhibition. I’m confident I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing right now. And with that confidence I return to racing ready to make my dreams my reality, make what I feel within become the world I live in.

How did I win the 2011 5th Ave Mile? I did it by finding myself first, chasing my dreams second and finally becoming what the world is now chasing.