

Rolling with the punches

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It had been years since Rob Kozarek had played in a football game or competed in any type of athletic event.

He'd never considered a marathon, and he was terrified when his coach signed him up for one.

The 2011 Chicago Marathon was Kozarek's first marathon and just his second race as a wheelchair racer. And during those 26.2 miles, he found again what he'd felt when he played football.



“After a football game, you're completely exhausted, completely drained, but you feel like you've done something. You feel a sense of accomplishment, a sense of euphoria,” Kozarek said. “Seeing all those people (at the marathon), feeling completely drained and knowing you just ran 26.2 miles — it's something I hadn't felt since football. I didn't have any inkling I'd feel that way again.

“By the time Chicago was done, I was hooked. I was in,” he said.

Kozarek was an offensive and defensive tackle on his high school football team in Madison, Wis. He had the size, at 6-foot-4 and 275 pounds, and the talent to catch the eye of recruiters.

In July 2005, the summer before his senior year of high school, he was scheduled to make a trip east to show off his skills at a football camp. He needed to make a quick stop at the farm where he worked before he caught his train.

It had poured rain that day. Kozarek wasn't speeding, but his car began hydroplaning on the water on the road. It spun around 180 degrees, and he hit a guardrail on an overpass. The car flipped five times, and Kozarek broke his back, neck and facial bones.

He says he “got lucky” in that he lived through the accident, but it left his lower body paralyzed.



Kozarek came to the University of Illinois in 2008. He'll graduate this spring with a degree in English.

He didn't get involved in sports right away at the UI, although he worked out in the gym.

"I took a long time away from sports, just because I was so disappointed with what happened with football," Kozarek said. "When you're 17 and as big as I was and you're going to play college ball, your whole life is football."

He missed the cardio workout he used to get, though. Last spring, he asked Adam Bleakney, coach of the UI's wheelchair track team, to help him find a racing wheelchair.

Kozarek had no intention of joining the team. He just wanted to start exercising again. But Bleakney encouraged him to join the team in their training sessions, and he eventually signed Kozarek up for the Chicago Marathon.

Having been away from sports for several years, Kozarek worried at first that he no longer had it in him to push himself physically and mentally.

"I don't know what it is about Adam, but he knows how to get people to do good things," Kozarek said. "He said, 'You're doing the work. You might as well do the racing too.'"

Bleakney downplays the role he played in getting Kozarek on the team.

"I think he was pretty passionate about it," Bleakney said. "He wanted to do the training everybody else was doing from the start. It was a very natural progression, a very quick progression.

"He is an incredibly talented athlete. He picked up the stroke mechanics quicker than I've ever seen anybody," he continued, adding that the stroke mechanics — or how an athlete hits the ring on his wheels to most efficiently maximize the force used to move the chair forward — is at the heart of success in the sport.

He was impressed with how quickly Kozarek improved.

Kozarek's first race was the Mahomet Half Marathon last August. He finished well behind his teammates, but they were there at the end, he said, supporting him when he crossed the finish line.

Then came Chicago. Kozarek finished the marathon in 2:09 (the winner of the wheelchair race last year finished in 1:29), and he immediately began looking for another race where he might qualify for the Boston Marathon.

In December, he finished the Palm Beaches Marathon in 1:50 and qualified for Boston.

Kozarek said the atmosphere at the Boston Marathon in April was “really special,” with the crowds of spectators encouraging the racers. His size is an advantage on the downhill, and he was flying down the hills at Boston at 45 mph. But at Heartbreak Hill, “I was crawling,” he said.

He finished the race in 1:54.

“The downhill is a strength for him, which Boston has, but it also has those climbs,” Bleakney said. “He’s a big guy, so he has to work extra hard to get up those hills.”

Additionally, the location of his injury means Kozarek doesn’t have use of his abdominal muscles.

“He’s got a lot of mass to move with just his upper back and arms. That really makes it even more impressive,” Bleakney said.

His size has earned him the nicknames Big Rob, Ogre and Shrek among his teammates. Bleakney said Kozarek’s funny, laid-back personality has made him a great addition to the team.

After graduation, Kozarek plans to stay in Champaign-Urbana and continue to train with the UI team. He’s applying for law school and hopes to use a law degree as a disability advocate.

He said the UI is “one of the best places to train in the world. You go out there every day with the same people, some of the best people in the world, and it intuitively makes you faster.”

He raced the half-marathon at the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon this past weekend in 58:59. This weekend, he’ll do the Indy Mini-Marathon on Saturday and the 12K Bloomsday Run in Spokane, Wash., on Sunday.

He’ll continue to race marathons as well.

“You are racing against yourself and your own mental capacity. The marathon is solely about mental toughness. You’re seeing how much you can push yourself again and again and again,” Kozarek said. “That’s what I really like about it.”

“After Palm Beach, when I knocked off 19 minutes on my personal record and qualified for Boston, it was one of the best feelings I’ve had in a long time. You have a feeling of accomplishing something, a feeling that I can become something I never thought I would,” he said. “It’s really created another direction in my life that I had no idea I’d be this happy with. Another journey. You get a curveball thrown at you, and you just have to run with it.”

Photos: Top, Rob Kozarek makes his way down Oak Street in Champaign in late April.

Bottom, Kozarek in his racing chair.

Photos by John Dixon/The News-Gazette.