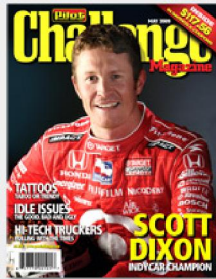



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Team Hoyt

By [Joan Tuppance](#)

June 1st, 2009

Mike Giallongo wasn't prepared for what he saw when he first met Dick Hoyt and his son Rick at the Bay State Triathlon in Medford, Mass., on Father's Day in 1984.

Rick, a nonverbal spastic quadriplegic with cerebral palsy, was nestled in a beanbag chair inside a two-man inflatable boat as he and his dad prepared for the swimming portion of the event. Dick was standing hip deep in Wright's Pond putting on a mesh vest that had been modified for him. The vest had an aluminum ring on the back to which a 10-foot rope was attached.

"That was the umbilical cord that connected Dick to Rick's boat," Giallongo says. Giallongo was visiting the Hoyts because he worked for a company that sponsored a customized running chair and a special bicycle that Team Hoyt would use in this, their first triathlon. "I couldn't believe my eyes. When the gun fired, signaling the start of the race, Dick swam off with Rick and the boat in tow. That was the first of many times Dick and Rick would amaze me; in fact, they still surprise and inspire me with their many accomplishments almost 25 years later."

When the swimming portion of the race was completed, Dick picked up Rick, carried him through the sand and positioned him in a chair on front of the handle bars of their bike's front tire. The two continued the bike race, coming in second to last in the overall competition. For some that placement may have been discouraging, but not for Team Hoyt, who saw it as the beginning of yet another adventure.

Dick, 68, and Rick, 47, have been racing since 1977. Since then, they have completed more than 1,000 competitions, including 229 triathlons, six Ironman distances and 66 marathons. This year they ran their 29th Boston Marathon, marking a milestone 1,000th competition.

Dave McGillivray, race director for the Boston Marathon, persuaded the Hoyts to enter the Bay State Triathlon, which at the time he was producing. He met the Hoyts after they ran by him during a race in Falmouth, Mass. "I was shocked that anyone pushing a chair could run that fast," he recalls. "I was amazed by it."

The Hoyts began racing when Rick was 15 and wanted to participate in a five-mile run to raise money for a student athlete at his high school who had been paralyzed in an accident. "Rick told me all about it," Dick says. "He wanted to run in that race."

Dick hesitated, unsure about not only his ability to run but also his ability to push Rick's wheelchair along the course. "My first thought was that I was 40 years old and I was not a runner," he recalls. "Rick's wheelchair was heavy and hard to push."

Nevertheless, Dick decided to go along with Rick's request. The two took off with the other runners. "Folks thought we would just race to the corner and turn back," Dick says. But they didn't. They managed to maneuver the sometimes hilly route even though Rick's wheelchair wanted to veer into the woods and Dick had to fight with it to hold it on course. Albeit a challenge, the father/son team managed to finish in next to last place. Back at home, Dick realized the

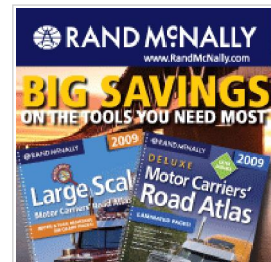


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race had taken a toll on his body. "I was disabled after that race," he says. "I couldn't walk. I had a hard time walking for about two weeks."

Many fathers would have made that race their first and last, but not Dick. When he and Rick got home that night, Rick told his dad that when he was out running it felt like his disability disappeared. "That was a powerful message for me," Dick confides. "Rick called himself free bird because he was free to run and compete with everyone else."

Up until that point, Rick's life had been anything but free. He hasn't been able to walk or talk since birth, when the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, cutting off oxygen to his brain. "That caused brain damage and cerebral palsy," explains Dick. "Rick can't control his arms or legs."

Even though he wasn't able to physically do the same things as his younger brothers, Rob and Russell, when he was growing up, Rick was included in all family outings. Dick and his wife, Judy – the two are now divorced – always knew that Rick was bright, even when he was a toddler. "We could see it in his eyes," Dick says.

Rick learned how to communicate via the computer using an interactive communicator created by engineers at Tufts University. He started using the device when he was 12. "We were betting on his first words," Dick says. "They turned out to be 'Go Bruins.' The Boston Bruins were playing for the Stanley Cup. Right then and there we knew that he understood and loved sports."

Dick is no stranger to sports himself. At 5 feet 6 inches and 172 pounds, he has a muscular, chiseled physique. He grew up playing baseball, hockey and football. After graduating from high school, he spent 37 years in the National Guard, retiring as a lieutenant colonel in the Air National Guard.

After Team Hoyt's first race, Dick realized that if the two were going to continue competing, they would need a specially built wheelchair for Rick. It had to be much lighter than his prescription chair and also easy to maneuver. Dick met with an engineer in New Hampshire who built a chair using pipes and tubing. "It was a running chair," Dick says. "It was a lot easier pushing this chair."

Team Hoyt's first official race was in 1979 in Springfield, Mass. The 10k drew 300 runners. As they were getting ready for the race, Rick and Dick tried to talk with some of the runners but none would engage in a conversation. "No one had ever seen anything like this. People didn't know what Rick had," Dick says. "They thought they might catch it."

The father/son team ended up finishing 150th out of the 300 runners. After that race, they participated in a race every weekend. They eventually won the respect of the runners but not before some families of disabled children accused Dick of running the races for his own glorification. "They didn't understand that Rick was the one dragging me to the races," Dick says.

In 1981 Team Hoyt applied to run the Boston Marathon only to find that their request was turned down. Not ones to give up, they approached the wheelchair division of the race but to no avail. "The told us if we wanted to line up behind them we could run," Dick says. "That was our first marathon. We ran it in three hours and 18 minutes, beating 85 percent of all the other runners." Their personal best for a marathon since then: 2 hours, 40 minutes and 47 seconds.

Dick and Rick were undaunted by the reaction they drew from the marathon. Their message of "Yes, you can" has been the same since day one of their racing career. "There is no such word in our vocabulary as 'can't,'" Dick says. "We just kept on competing. We didn't take no for an answer."

Team Hoyt set a precedent when they unofficially ran that first marathon. "When they eventually got into the marathon [on an official basis], they qualified like everyone else," McGillivray says. "Now they are starting to develop guidelines for this kind of Hoyt-type participation because of what they have accomplished and the exposure they have gotten."

Dick and Rick have found that their racing experiences serve to motivate and inspire other individuals facing challenges. In 1989, the family formed The Hoyt Foundation Inc. to help build the "self-confidence and self-esteem of America's disabled young people through inclusion in all facets of daily life," including

sports. The organization also provides donations for groups such as Kamp for Kids, Challenged Athletes Foundation and Pioneer Valley Therapeutic Riding.

When Dick retired from the military in 1995, he began speaking to organizations such as Rotary and Lions clubs. "All of a sudden I started speaking to companies," Dick says. "Now I speak all over the United States." Dick's motivational speeches chronicle his life story. Rick accompanies him to some of the speaking engagements. "When he goes he does the first 15 minutes using his computer, which has a voice synthesizer," Dick says.

During their career, the Hoyts have brought history and tradition to racing. "They are revered, cherished icons," McGillivray says. "It's amazing what they have done and continue to do. In a tongue-in-cheek way, Dick has it easy because he has the secret weapon, his motivator and inspiration right in front of him all the time. That keeps Dick moving his legs."

Dick's "tough as nails" persona took a setback in 2003 when he suffered a heart attack getting ready for the Boston Marathon. The only sign he had was an odd tickle in his throat after running a half-marathon for training. "I was stopping at water stops and I usually don't stop," he said. He ran five more races before going to his doctor. After an EKG and further testing, Dick had to have three stents put into his main artery, which was 95 percent blocked. Another artery had an 85 percent blockage. "The doctors didn't know how I had been running like I had," Dick says. "They said if I hadn't been in the shape I was in I would have died 15 years ago."

While Dick was recovering, McGillivray offered to push Rick in the Boston Marathon. "Dick told me he appreciated the concept, but, he said, 'We are one. We are in there for the bond. You can't break it.'"

Eager to resume his racing schedule, Dick started training four weeks after his procedure. He and Rick competed in an Ironman contest a few months later.

While much attention is paid to Rick because of the racing bond he and his father share, Dick is close to all three of his sons. Rob now works as a machinist and Russell serves as a principal at a school for autistic children. "We play in golf tournaments and I have a house on the lake as well as a boat," Dick says. "We get together quite often."

Before Dick and Rick competed in their first official triathlon, the two raced against Russell in a Vermont triathlon. "We got out of the water ahead of Russell but he passed us on the two-mile-high hill," Dick recalls. "He said, 'when you finish I will be under a shade tree.' We ended up beating him. We waited for him and gave him a big hug."

Rick has inherited his father's independent spirit. He has lived on his own since he graduated with a degree in special education from Boston University in 1993. He worked in Boston College's computer lab for a while, helping to develop technology that would benefit paralyzed individuals. He is currently in the process of writing a book. "He's also been involved with Children's Hospital Boston," Dick says. This year, the Hoyts dedicated their Boston Marathon run to the hospital, asking for donations to help the Children's Department of Otolaryngology and Center for Communication Enhancement.

Dick and Rick have always been great with kids, according to family friend Pat Forrest. "They are always willing to talk with people and pose with them," he says. "You never see Dick say no to anybody."

Over the span of 30 years, Team Hoyt has won more than 25 awards, including the 2008 Public Service Award of the FREDDIE Awards, known as the Oscars in Health and Medicine. Last October, Team Hoyt was inducted into the Ford Ironman World Championship Hall of Fame in Hawaii, joining a group of only 27 athletes. "We think about how nobody wanted us and now to be inducted into the Ironman Hall of Fame," Dick says, pausing for a moment. "That is unbelievable."

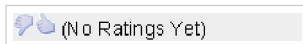
The devotion and dedication that Dick and Rick share with each other have served as inspiration for people around the globe. "We've had e-mails from people who were ready to commit suicide and have seen our videos," Dick says. "We've had e-mails from alcoholics and drug addicts who are now clean and sober. It's amazing what's happening from our story. We've been able to help millions of people worldwide."

This year Team Hoyt plans to participate in 25 runs, half the amount they ran 20 years ago. "It's getting harder on Rick as he gets older," Dick says. "His body is changing. He has to put up with all the elements. How much longer we can race I don't know."

Their bodies may be showing signs of stress from age but the bond between them is growing stronger every day. "There is nothing we can't do together," Dick says.

Looking back, Giallongo sees that 1984 Father's Day when he met the Hoyts as a day that changed his life. "It opened my eyes to so many things, most notably the trials and tribulations of the physically challenged and their families," he says. "Dick and Rick and their family and friends taught me that there is no reason why anyone, regardless of their physical capability, cannot participate in most aspects of daily life. Yes, it can be difficult, but in overcoming that difficulty there is also an overwhelming feeling of self-worth and accomplishment. I am a better person for having known them."

Visit www.teamhoyt.com to learn more about this amazing father and son team.



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