

ACHIEVEMENTS

Going the Distance

Club Board President Mike Biagi, Airports, writes about his experience running the Boston Marathon.



Story and photos by Mike Biagi, Chief, Landside Operations Division, Airports/LAX, and Club Board Member

I haven't always been a runner.

In fact, when I was 10 years old

my parents signed me up for soccer, but I played only one season because I didn't like all the running. Baseball was my sport, surfing was my recreation and golf was the source of my frustration. (If you're a golfer, you'll understand what I mean by that.)

But being in love will make you do some pretty crazy things.

When Marla and I married in 1997, she was a runner and participated in a variety of events – the Susan Komen breast cancer runs, a half-marathon, etc. One of her goals had always been to run a full marathon. About four years ago, when she was lacing up to pound the pavement, I asked if I could join her. To my surprise she said okay. I wasn't going for the running; I just wanted to be with her. We had a good time and before long we were running together often.

After a few months we decided to run a half-marathon together, and we really enjoyed it. Some time after that, we decided to tackle her dream of running a full marathon. Together, we crossed the finish line of the Pacific Shoreline Marathon (now called the Surf City Marathon) in five hours flat on Super Bowl Sunday 2007. We were thrilled! The Orange County Register did a news story on our run and we basked in our achievement for a long time. I definitely had the running bug, and I wanted to keep going.

I come from a long line of overachievers. My Dad (Del Biagi), whom many of you probably know, was the youngest general manager the City ever had at age 43. His dad was a decorated war hero, and my great-grandfather came to the United States from Italy. My mom is a member of MENSA, and her uncle was a real-life rocket scientist for the government! So I

guess the need to push myself is in my genes.

Now that Marla and I had run a marathon together, I wanted to see what kind of time I could run on my own. So, on Feb. 3, 2008, in a driving rain and 30 mph winds, I took the first steps towards my personal goal of running a marathon in less than four hours. I finished the race in 3 hours 48 minutes, and I swore I would never run another marathon. I was beat up, sore and mentally exhausted for a long time after that race. I'm sure the weather had a lot to do with how I felt.

As I talked to other runners I knew, they told me that my time of 3:48 wasn't too far off from the qualifying time I would need to run the Boston Marathon, the oldest and most prestigious marathon there is. At first I thought they were crazy, and I dismissed the idea. However, a friend of mine gave me a book about a guy who runs 100-mile races, and another good friend snapped a picture of the Boston Marathon finish line, which is painted on the street in the heart of the city. With these things as my motivation, I began my training program in August 2008.

Running eight minutes per mile for 26.2 miles was incomprehensible to me when I started. I struggled with the long runs, had a hard

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time with some of the pace runs and generally wondered if I would make it. About two thirds of the way into the training, though, I broke through and started running faster and feeling better. After I completed a 20-mile run in late November, I felt ready to tackle the California International Marathon Dec. 7, 2008.

Stepping Stone: Sacramento

The course begins in Folsom and winds through some quaint little towns before finishing on the Capitol steps in downtown Sacramento. I got off the bus at the starting line at 6:30 a.m. and the floodlights illuminated several long lines of portable toilets. I had never seen so many assembled in one place! But I guess with 6,000 people entered in the race it was necessary. The starting gun went off at 7 a.m. sharp and we were under way.

The weather that morning was perfect. It was 39 degrees, and a thick fog hung about 100 feet off the ground. The wind was calm. We sounded like a herd of elephants as we stomped along for the first quarter mile. The runners were shoulder-to-shoulder and you could feel everyone's excitement. Because this course is considered a good qualifier for Boston there were many of us trying to make our time.

Before I really knew what was happening, I passed the 10-mile marker. I couldn't believe it! The race was going by too fast. I figured I had better start enjoying it or it would be over before I knew it. The story was much different as I approached mile 18, though. I couldn't believe there were eight more miles to go and I wondered if I would finish in 3 hours 30 minutes (my qualifying time).

Spectators lined much of the course, hollering their encouragement as we passed by. I saw moms being kissed by their children, I saw dads getting water bottles from their wives, and lots of people holding homemade signs and cheer-



Mike Biagi, Chief, Landside Operations Division, Airports/LAX, and Club Board President, achieved his dream of running the Boston Marathon.

route was lined with spectators. They came out of the woodwork to see the race and cheer every runner like you were a champion! I had a wonderful time interacting with the crowd, talking with my fellow runners and even taking a few phone calls from family and friends during the race (I carried my cell phone and asked some people to call me...crazy, huh?). Making the last turn onto Boylston Street was really special. The streets were lined with bleachers on both sides, and the roar of the crowd felt like a World Series baseball game. I crossed the finish line in 3:54 and I felt great! I had done something that just a couple of years ago I had never even considered doing.

As I have looked back on all of this, I've come to realize that this experience has taught me a lot about myself. I have drawn on the lessons I've learned in many other parts of my life. Most importantly, I've learned that hard work and determination can take you places you never thought possible.

Never Forget Your Dreams

Right now the City is facing some pretty tough times. Talk of layoffs, furloughs and salary cuts fills the headlines. To City workers like you and me who don't have a lot of decision-making power, these can be scary times. But I'm convinced that if we stick together, keep grinding it out and pressing on towards our goal we can help the City pull out of this tailspin before it's too late.

In my personal life, too, there have been applications from this marathon experience. I have three teenagers, and it's been tough lately. Sometimes I feel like I'm at mile 25 and I'm running out of steam. But with Marla at my side we continue to encourage each other and persevere through the difficulties. Someday we'll look back on these years and smile. But until then we'll keep running the race...together.

When I began this adventure, I was not sure I would be able to qualify for Boston. But somewhere along the line I realized that while Boston was the goal, I was being changed through the training and the discipline necessary to pursue the dream. I came to understand that for me, even if I didn't run fast enough to hit a time of 3:30, I had set my sights on something that previously had been way beyond my reach. Even if I fell short I still would have been excited about trying to make it.

Every one of us has something that we really want to do but have been afraid to try. Something that has seemed too far out of reach, a dream that would require too great an effort. I would encourage you to take a fresh look at your dreams. Take them off the shelf and out of the box, shine some light on them and see if you can't take a shot at making your dreams come true. As I was, you might be surprised at the things you can accomplish when you set your sights high.



Marla and Mike Biagi, partners in life ... and running.