

RUBBERMAID PRESENTS **Surviving The Unbelievable**

Winner By A Smile



Supported by friends and fans, Koplowitz fights MS by finishing the NYC Marathon.

ZOE KOPLOWITZ STARTS THE NEW York City Marathon every year at 6 a.m., a five-hour head start on the rest of the field. Even so, all of the other 30,000 runners in the race eventually pass her—first the world-class athletes, then the midpackers, followed by a trickle of stragglers, until finally, there's no one else. The cheering fans move inside from their fire escapes, pack up their lawn chairs and head for warmth. The water stations disappear, the streets reopen to traffic, and Koplowitz and a succession of friends are left alone on the cold and dark 26.2-mile journey.

Koplowitz has finished last in every NYC Marathon the past 12 years, and she'll start her 13th on Nov. 5. It takes her more than 24 hours, walking straight through the night, to complete the course. Last year, she toured the five boroughs in 30:52:12. But that's not such a bad time when you realize that Koplowitz, 52, has multiple sclerosis, which reduces her motion to a painful, crutch-aided shuffle. Severe neuropathy makes her legs feel like they're "numb and getting stabbed at the same time." And because she's diabetic she must stop and test her blood every two miles.

Diagnosed with MS when she was 25, Koplowitz's life changed after she nearly choked to death on a vitamin pill. That experience convinced her to shake up her quiet existence. "I needed to pick

something to reinvent myself," she says.

With the help of the Achilles Track Club, a running organization for people with disabilities, that something turned out to be the marathon. On a normal day, Koplowitz only needs her left crutch; on marathon day, she needs both. She also is helped by her best friend Hester Sutherland (above), who has completed every NYC Marathon with her except one. (Koplowitz also has finished marathons in Boston and London.) Other supporters come out to walk a few blocks or miles, and the Guardian Angels, an unarmed volunteer security force, show up at the 17-mile mark to escort her through the night. Local restaurants and police stations provide rest stops en route, and occasionally she will sit down just long enough to eat a cup of soup or an egg.

Brief snacks do little to assuage her exhaustion, but she would never think of quitting. "Sometimes at night you tell bad jokes, the Guardian Angels sing silly songs," Koplowitz says. "Sometimes you talk. In some neighborhoods there are potholes and bad sidewalks,

and it's all you can do to keep putting one foot in front of the other." Then the sun rises again—it's the second day-break she'll witness—and she nears the finish line encouraged by onlookers.

The metaphorical significance is not lost on a woman who has endured her own dark times. Since the mid-'90s, her heroic treks have made headlines, and she now has a career as a motivational speaker, author (*The Winning Spirit*), and spokeswoman for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society (800-FIGHT-MS).

"My mission is to help people reinvent the way they think about 'winning,'" she says. "I believe people run marathons every day of their lives in one way or another, and we need to remember to give ourselves the finishers' medals we deserve."

Her message is spreading. The crowds disappear during the night, but so many people turn out the next day to greet her at the finish line, race officials put up barricades to keep her path clear. The last finisher gets a hero's welcome, evidence that winning has, indeed, been reinvented.—Sarah Lorge



In '99 she made it in 30:52:12.

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