
THE CrossFit LIFE

Yes, You Can

Hospitalized with bipolar disorder, Chuck Wagner finds a way out of the darkness through running, CrossFit and an inspiring father-son team. Hilary Achauer reports.

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Matt Ladin

In August 2010, Chuck Wagner was in good shape physically. A young man in his 20s, he was training for a marathon and played competitive lacrosse. Wagner was a working professional living the good life at the beach in San Diego, Calif.

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Inside, however, he was falling apart. Wagner's grandfather had died in 2009, and the loss affected him more than he expected. Rather than taking time to process his grief, Wagner took just one day off and returned to work as if everything was normal. He kept pushing forward, stuffing down his increasingly dark thoughts until he lost control one night at a work event.

That night set off something within Wagner, and things kept sliding downhill until he ended up in the hospital in August 2010, depressed and suicidal. After a series of tests and psychiatric evaluations, Wagner was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He spent 30 days in treatment and was out of work for almost four months.

During this time—in the hospital and in his group therapy sessions—Wagner kept thinking about the marathon he was signed up for in April 2011. Wagner had been accepted to run the Boston Marathon as part of Team Hoyt. You may have heard about the father-and-son team of Dick and Rick Hoyt. Born in 1962, Rick suffered oxygen deprivation to the brain at birth and was diagnosed as a spastic quadriplegic with cerebral palsy. Dick and Rick started running together in the 1970s, with Dick pushing Rick in a wheelchair. After their first race together, Rick told his dad, "Dad, when I'm running, it feels like I'm not handicapped."

Since then, Dick and Rick have completed more than 1,000 races, including six Ironman competitions. (I defy you to watch this [video](#) about one of their Ironman races without sobbing.) Dick turned 70 in 2011, and he still runs, pushing and pulling Rick along with him. The message of Team Hoyt is "Yes, you can!"

When he was in the hospital, Wagner heard a lot about what he shouldn't do and what he couldn't do now that he had been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. Everyone told him he had to stop training, focus on his mental health and find the right balance of medications.

One of Wagner's therapists took a different approach. He told Wagner that as part of his treatment, he wanted him to try something new. A lacrosse buddy of Wagner's told him about CrossFit, and Wagner decided he would check out CrossFit Pacific Beach, the box in his neighborhood.

"He was very open with us about his struggles," said Bryan Boorstein, one of the owners of CrossFit PB. "We told him we'd help him learn new things and help him get in shape for the marathon. The first thing we worked on was his flexibility. He couldn't overhead squat with an empty bar, and he couldn't front squat because of lack of flexibility in his wrists."

Wagner began building up his strength and increasing his flexibility, and as he did he became involved in the CrossFit community.

"He enjoyed the environment, the people and challenging himself," Boorstein said.

As Wagner worked on his strength and flexibility with CrossFit and trained for the marathon, he started on the process of finding the right balance of medication for his illness. He was feeling great in the beginning of 2011 and decided to run a half marathon as part of his marathon training. He started out strong, feeling good after a few months of CrossFit.

Toward the second half of the race, Wagner started to feel lightheaded. He ignored the sensation because the rest of his body felt great, but he started to feel increasingly strange as he neared the end. Determined to finish, Wagner kept running. His body had other ideas.



Jennifer Wagner

Chuck Wagner has overcome bipolar disorder and proved to himself that he can do just about anything.



Amanda K. Gordon

Team Hoyt has been inspiring people since the 1970s.

Wagner collapsed 500 yards from the finish line. One of the drugs Wagner was taking was lithium, which affects the flow of sodium through the body. The drug can cause severe dehydration. As he ran, Wagner became more and more dehydrated, until his body just gave in. Wagner spent a day in the emergency room. While he recovered, a doctor came in and gave him a stern lecture.

"You shouldn't do these events," the doctor told Wagner. "It's irresponsible. Your focus must be your health."

But Wagner wasn't running the race for himself. He was running for Team Hoyt, to raise money for the Hoyt Foundation, which works to build confidence and self-esteem for disabled youth. He couldn't bring himself to call his team and say, "No, I can't."

Determined to run the marathon, Wagner worked with his doctors to revise his training plan.

"It was a slice of humble pie," Wagner said.

"I came up with a walk/run method to make sure I didn't get dehydrated," he said. "I would run a mile, walk a minute, and make sure I had water or some energy gel every 4 miles."

Wagner didn't want his friends at CrossFit to know what had happened at the half marathon, but he took the owners of CrossFit PB aside and asked for their help. Boorstein told Wagner that he and co-owner Anders Varner would help him train safely, and they came up with a strength program to complement his running.

By the time the 2011 marathon came along in April, Wagner had raised close to \$8,000 for the Hoyt Foundation. He started off the race mindful of his collapse at the half marathon.

"This time, I was running for fun," Wagner said.

The Boston Marathon starts in a rural area and ends in the city. It winds through Wellesley College, where the students come out and cheer on the runners as they pass by.

Wagner started out slowly, but as he ran his legs felt strong. He could feel the effect of almost a year of CrossFit. By the time he reached Heartbreak Hill at Mile 20, "I was sprinting," Wagner said. "I didn't do any hill training leading up to the race, but I didn't stop at all up that hill. It's a testament to the strength work I did at CrossFit PB."

By the time Wagner got to the finish line, he was still sprinting. He ran the second half of the race faster than the first and didn't feel any of the dehydration that had led to his collapse during the half marathon. Wagner ran a conservative race, forcing himself to take walk breaks throughout, and finished in 5:30.

"I was just happy to run to the finish instead of crossing it in an ambulance," Wagner said.

This year, Wagner is back at it, running the Boston Marathon a second time. He'd like to finish in 4:30 or 4:45, but typical of his generous spirit, Wagner's focus is not on himself.

In Thanksgiving 2011, Wagner's close friend Leo Martin was seriously injured in an ATV accident. He ended up in a coma and is just now breathing on his own and starting to talk again, but he is unable to move the rest of his body.

"I'm dedicating the race to him," Wagner said. "His story has given me a newfound focus. I feel like he's pushing me. I'm lucky to be able to do stuff like this—it's the least I could do."

CrossFit and marathons. Cerebral palsy and bipolar disorder. No matter the sport, no the obstacle, don't listen if they say, "No, you can't."

Yes, you can.

