

Rochester runner fights illness in Olympic marathon quest



Beth Haag, right, has been running or cycling to her house in the background since she began seriously training for marathons. Her mother and coach, Patricia Haag, takes her as far away from home as she wants, and then Beth gets out and heads home.

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Beth Haag knows something about long, difficult races.

After all, Haag was one of Western New York's premier women distance runners after winning a record five Rochester Marathons between 1982 and 1987.

But Haag is involved in a different sort of race now.

The Chili native is trying to overcome the effects of a thyroid condition that put 50 pounds on her slender, runner's body, ended her chances of qualifying for the 1988 Olympic trials and has kept her from running competitively since 1987.

Now, Haag has set her sights on qualifying for the 1992 Olympic trials.

Such a goal is no more improbable than Haag's entry into the world of competitive running in the first place.

Haag grew up in Chili, graduating from St. Pius the X School in 1972 and Gates Chili High School in 1976. Except for a brief stint with the high school's golf team, she was not involved with school sports — and certainly not running.

While studying police science at the State University of New York at Brockport, Haag began running on her own. "I had started running by myself at night because it was a good emotional release and it seemed to help me study better," she recalled.

In 1981, Haag decided to try the

Rochester Marathon. The longest distance she had run previous to the marathon was 17 miles. Now she was trying to run 26 miles, 385 yards.

She finished third with a time of 3:37:38. "After my first marathon, I realized that I really did like marathons, so I decided to pursue that," she said.

Still, she did not run in another race until the 1982 Rochester Marathon. Instead, she concentrated on her work as a state trooper and on training.

The work paid off. In 1982, Haag trimmed more than 20 minutes off her time while winning the Rochester Marathon in 3:16:43.

Haag's time in that race qualified her for the Boston Marathon. She also began to compete in a number of other marathons and distance races over the next three years, winning the Rochester Marathon again in 1983 and 1984.

Besides emerging as one of upstate New York's outstanding distance runners, Haag gained notoriety for a distinctive slogan she wore on her shirt. Written across the front of the shirt was, "GUIDED BY GOD."

"This has been the theme of my life," Haag said. "I believe in all things that I've been guided by God."

That message became a source of controversy, even ridicule for Haag, but she continued to wear it. An active member of St. Pius X Parish, her faith was important to her. The shirt, she noted, was a way of sharing that faith with others.

"If even one person got some kind of spiritual pickup from that (message), then it was worth it," she observed.

Haag finished third in the 1985 Rochester Marathon, but returned the following year to win the race with a women's course record of 2:54:27. A time of approximately 2:50 was needed to qualify for the trials for the 1988 Olympics, and for the first time she began to seriously believe that she had a chance.

In 1987, Haag quit her job as a state trooper, finding the rotating schedule she had to work was interfering with her training. She won the Lake Ontario Marathon that summer, then successfully defended her Rochester Marathon title.

But even in winning, she began to notice something was wrong. Her time was off, and she pulled a hamstring muscle in the race and was forced to quit competing for several months. During the time of inactivity, her weight began to climb.

When she began trying to run again, she was plagued by minor injuries, something which she'd never had to deal with before. And her weight kept increasing.

Finally, she was diagnosed in the fall of 1988 as suffering from hypothyroidism.

"In some ways, I may have done it to myself," Haag reflected. "For six, seven years, I trained really hard, running 70 to 90 miles a week. I was semi-starving myself."

In addition to the effects on her body, Haag began to discover how much her running had affected her life. "Running had become too much of a priority at the time," she said. "I let it interfere with things that should have been more important, like my job, family, friends."

Running had also started to interfere with her faith, she realized. "I think for years (the message on her shirt) may have been almost hypocritical," she said.

One of the most devastating effects of her illness was the weight gain. She gained nearly 50 pounds. "For me, weight has a lot to do with my racing time," she said. "I'm not inherently fast."

Without running, and because so many other aspects of her life had been put aside to make room for the sport, Haag found herself becoming almost suicidal, she said, noting, "I'd given up a lot of things to pursue this dream, and then the dream was gone. That's where my faith came in. Without that, I would have fallen apart."

Haag began taking medications to control the condition, suffering various side-effects as the doctors tried to get her metabolism adjusted. She also returned to school, completing a bachelor's degree in physical education in 1988, and a master's degree in education in 1990.



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Haag finished first among women in the 1987 Lake Ontario Marathon.

During that time, Haag worked as a substitute teacher and part-time physical education instructor. She thought of teaching, but decided she wanted to return to police work. "I missed it," she said. "I enjoyed the variety, the excitement. I wanted to go back to it as a higher priority in my life than running."

Currently, Haag is waiting to learn if she will be accepted in the next class of men and women seeking positions in the Monroe County Sheriff's Department.

This past spring, Haag's weight peaked at 165 pounds. In addition to trying a return to police work, she decided to start running again — this time with the 1992 Olympic trials as a goal.

"I'm not trying for the Olympics," Haag acknowledged. "I want to run fast enough to qualify for the Olympic trials — which would be an honor."

She is now running approximately 70 miles per week. Haag also rides her bicycle approximately 150 miles per week, and works out with weights three times a week. Her weight is already down below 150 pounds — which is still 40 pounds above her running weight.

Nevertheless, Haag speculated that she will be ready to start running again competitively in 1991, and will then have a year to get her time low enough to qualify for the Olympic trials in 1992.

This time, however, she said she'll be running with a different attitude.

"I've lost the competitive drive (against) other people," she said. "But I would like to qualify for the trials (because) that's running against the clock."

And if she fails to qualify?
"It's such a long shot," Haag said, "but I've always been a believer in trying."



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