





# LONG DISTANCE CALL

*Sportswriter Ray Diggs comes out from behind the desk*

*to tackle a marathon, but only after sensing a*

*higher calling* ■ By Ray Diggs II

**W**HAT IS IT THAT drives people to run? What is it about the human will that pushes us to cover long distances on foot when we don't really have to?

For some, it's the desire to stay physically fit. For others, it's the joy of being outside and free. Or the quest for glory.

For me, it started with Jesse Owens.

It was 1979, my second year of competitive running. I was participating in a youth track-and-field meet when I got the chance of a lifetime. I got to meet Jesse Owens.

Owens, for those too young to remember, was the legendary American runner whose humility, class, and dignity made him one of this country's greatest athletes. At the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, he captured the gold in the 100-meter dash and in the 200-meter dash, then captured America's heart as he stood before Adolf Hitler and received his awards.

A black American had demonstrated to Hitler the foolishness of his one-race-is-superior philosophy.

I had heard of his greatness; but when I met him, I met my inspiration. I wanted to run like Jesse Owens.

Of course, I never did, but his memory kept me going through a mildly successful running career in high school.

At George Washington High School in San Francisco, our cross-country team won two city-section cross-country championships. During the track season, I competed in the 1,600- and 3,200-meter runs. As a senior, I ran a 10:32 in the 3,200, fourth best in the city. I also finished high school as the city's fifth-ranked 1,600 runner.

In college I continued to run, but I increased my distance to the 5K race. Then the dream died. Back and knee injuries ended my college running career. It looked like the end of any Jesse Owens-type success. And it looked like the end of my childhood goal of running and finishing a marathon.

◀ **Pounding the pavement.** Ray Diggs turned the street into his beat when he transformed himself from reporter to runner at the LA Marathon.

That was 12 years ago.

Yet early last year, on a rainy, 50-degree Sunday, I embarked on my greatest athletic challenge—the Los Angeles Marathon.

Before last year, the longest distance I had ever run competitively was 8 miles—and that was 14 years earlier.

**The Decision.** So what happened? How did I graduate from retired runner with bad knees to a 30-year-old guy who could attempt to run a distance equivalent to running from Pasadena to Los Angeles? What was the drive that led a journalist from Riverside, California, to go for the big run?

Perhaps I could credit the Jesse Owens factor.

Perhaps I could say it was my own determination.

But I think it was something else.

Something that began in August 1994, while I was visiting my friend Marva in Los Angeles.

"Ray, have you thought about getting back into running?" she asked. "You're still young."

At the time, competitive running was the farthest thing from my mind. I had thought about doing some running for my health—but it never went beyond that.

To Marva I said, "Maybe." I didn't give it a second thought until we started praying together. Marva prayed, "Anoint this marathon body for your glory, Lord."

Back home in Riverside, those words echoed in my mind for the next 48 hours. And I began to feel confident that the Lord was telling me to go for it. I also remembered my childhood dream of finishing a marathon. And Jesse Owens.

I called Marva back 2 days later and told her I was going to start running again. I was going to take on the Los Angeles Marathon.

**The Regimen.** Now what do I do? Where does one start as he tries to take a body that's been sitting behind a desk writing newspaper articles, and turn it into a fine-tuned machine that can go all-out for more than 4 hours?

I started with the shoes—my first investment in my new avocation.

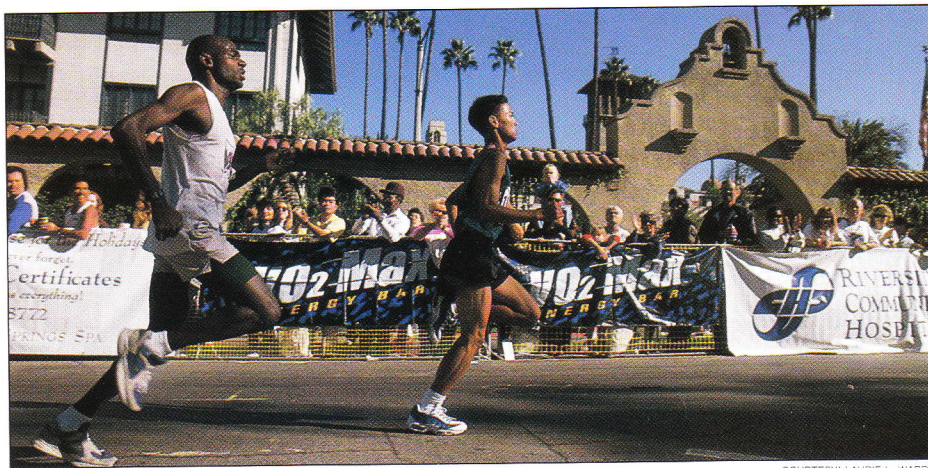
Then I found a fitness center where I could begin a strength-and-conditioning program.

But when it came time to decide on the right kinds of running workouts and the number of miles I needed to run each week, I wasn't so confident. So I asked God to lead me in that area. Proverbs 3:6



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COURTESY: LAURIE L. WARD

▲ **Ray's roads.** It was just a tune-up for writer Ray Diggs' marathon debut, but Ray did better than expected in the Mission Inn Run—his first run since college.

reminded me, "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (NKJV). I knew I had a lot of work to do, but I also knew that God would direct my paths.

I decided on a training regimen with these components:

- one 3-mile run each day
- four weightlifting sessions per week
- 2 days of rest per week
- one 8-mile run per week

The training part was enjoyable because I'd done this in the past, and it took me down memory lane. The joy of running again and relieving stress made my workouts fun.

I did, however, have some struggles along the way; namely, relentless injuries and occasional lack of motivation. In my 7 months of training, I suffered shin splints, back problems, tendinitis, the flu, and a food-induced illness. I even injured my shoulder in my sleep. As for motivation, I had to ask myself constantly, "Why am I doing this?"

I knew the answer. I did it out of obedience to God. If I truly felt that He wanted me to run this marathon—in answer to my prayer with Marva—then I had no choice. With that thought in mind, I could run even on days when I didn't feel like it.

Another factor that increased my motivation was the flexibility of my training program. If you're hurt, don't run. If your body is tired, decrease your mileage or take the day off. Knowing I could take a break as my body required helped me not to give up.

**The Tune-up Races.** One of the key elements of marathon training is competing in tune-up races. This gives the runner-in-training some racing experience before he or she takes on the daunting 26-mile, 385-yard run.

The 1994 Mission Inn Run in Riverside (a 10K, or 6-mile, run) was my first tune-up—and my first race in 8 years. I was excited and nervous at the same time.

As was my pattern in school, I went out hard and was tense at the beginning. After the first mile, I was able to run at a relaxed pace and start moving up in the pack.

As I hit that final mile, the race got harder and my focus became more intense. I blocked out everything around me. With 400 meters to go, I pulled away from my nearest runner and did an all-out sprint in the final 200 (doing my best Michael Johnson imitation). I finished in 40 minutes flat, which was good for 24th overall and second in my age division. The race results and getting a medal boosted my confidence. I was racing again, and it felt better than I expected!

Eight weeks and innumerable training miles later, I was back on a race course. This was the Mt. Rubidoux 5K, and it was run on the day before Super Bowl XXIX.

I repeated the early pace work, just as I had run in my first race, but this time the pace bothered me. When the race was over, I was excited about establishing a new personal record (19:01; old mark, 19:48), placing seventh overall, and winning my age division (30-34). But I felt as if I had won ugly, because I know what happens when you go out too hard early. You fade out early. I'd have to make some changes in my early-race pace.

A week later, I ran in my final tune-up race before The Big One in LA. This was the Long Beach Half-Marathon, an event that was massive in comparison to the other two races. The race was much longer, and the field of runners was huge.

I went out at the new, slower pace and then picked it up gradually. The final result: 96th overall finish out of more than 1,000 runners. I finished 33rd in my age division.

**The Taper Time.** With the LA Marathon just a month away and with the excitement building within me, I began to intensify my workouts.

• The first 2 weeks: Run 20 miles by midweek, do one weight-training session each week and take one easy, long run: 16 miles the first week; 18 miles the next. Why? So my body and mind would know what to expect on that big day.

• The final 2 weeks: I cut my mileage back from 40 miles a week to 20. Then, in the final week, I ran only 8 miles. This is called a taper. The purpose is to have some activity but let my body recover from all the running and pounding.

## LA Marathon

**The Day Before.** I spent the day before the race taking care of last-minute things—paying racing fees and collecting samples (energy bars, sports drinks, and racing publications) at the racing exposition in downtown LA.

I didn't like the fact that I had to get my car fixed. That was a diversion I didn't need. Mundane things like that can ruin your focus on pre-race day.

As the day came to a close, my anticipation kept climbing, almost to the point of overwhelming me. For some runners, this condition would seem scary. I welcomed it, though. I'd rather face such a race with excitement than with fear.

### The Final Instructions.

At 6:00 a.m., 2½ hours before the gun would sound, I was already up, getting dressed, and figuring out how I was going to finish this race in less than 4 hours, which was my goal. Since LA is a long drive from Riverside, I was staying with friends near the marathon site. My host was still asleep when I went outside to stretch and warm-up. It was a 50-degree, overcast, and soggy day in the City of Angels.

An hour later my host was up and discussing with me my mental state and my racing plans. I commented that I planned to begin with an easy pace and then pick it up at the halfway point. My host reminded me of what I did at Mission Inn and Mt. Rubidoux (going out too fast), and that I needed to run the marathon like I did in Long Beach. Moments later, my prayer partner Marva showed up and repeated what my friend told me.

Would I listen to their advice? Time would tell.

After a moment of prayer, I was off, not to see the Wizard of Oz nor the Wizard of Westwood, but to tackle my dream journey of 26 miles.

### The Moment of Challenge.

There I was with 20,000-plus racers, standing outside the LA Memorial Coliseum in the cold and rain waiting for the race to start. After



months of preparation, we were ready to roll! Mayor Richard Riordan shouldn't have been surprised, then, when many of us were a bit perturbed with him for delaying the start of the marathon with his ill-timed unity speech.

Finally, the mayor was done, and the LA Marathon was under way.

Thirty seconds after the start, I heard the crowd roaring, and I wondered who the cheers could be for. I knew it wasn't for Ray Diggs. Soon I discovered that the fans were applauding a man who wasn't even running the marathon. It was former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, the marathon's grand marshal. It was a special moment for me, because the great boxer's achievements had inspired me and many other kids who grew up without a father.

The first 6 miles of the race were surprisingly easy as I ran down Figueroa Street in the Exposition Park District, then through downtown LA, Little Tokyo, and Chinatown. I took advantage of every water station for the next 4 miles as we ran north on Cesar Chavez Street, passing through the communities of Echo Park and Silver Lake. At the 10-mile mark, I was still running an easy pace.

Mile 11 took me down Sunset Boulevard and landed me in Hollywood. I didn't bother looking at the great Hollywood "Walk of Fame." I had to keep moving. Soon I was approaching the halfway mark of the marathon: Mann's Chinese Theater.

I quickly reviewed the first half of the race and decided that everything had gone quite well—except for the three stops I made to go to the restroom. That was something I would pay for dearly.

Miles 14 through 16 took me out of Hollywood and the famous Sunset and Vine intersection area. I left the entertainment capital of the world and headed into the business district of LA: Wilshire Boulevard.

I was still running easily, but I didn't know that trouble loomed ahead.

The first sign of difficulty came at mile 18. I had this weird sensation that I was about to run into something. I was also getting muscle cramps in my right hamstring, and I had to run with that difficulty for 2 miles as we headed into Koreatown.

With 6 miles to go, I was really struggling. I knew what it was. I realized that the weird sensation back at mile 18 meant I had hit the "wall" long-distance runners fear. Mile 18 was about 3 miles too soon for that to happen. When you hit the "wall," your legs reach a physical point where they don't move naturally. You have to will them to move. As I exited Koreatown and headed back toward Exposition Park (with 4 miles left), all I could think of was, "I hope my friends are praying for me."

The other thing I kept telling myself was this: "Ray, you'll be all right when you reach the 22nd mile." Mile 22 is special because it's where my church is located. I was positive that somebody would be waiting there to cheer me toward the finish.

Well, I made it to the church, but I was barely running. My drained body could hardly move. The rain was falling harder now, and it was miserably cold.

I looked at my watch and noticed two things: I wasn't going to run a sub-4-hour marathon, and it was 11:45. All my friends would be in the 11:30 service. They wouldn't be out on the sidewalk to spur me on! That nearly made me quit, because I was really looking forward to the encouragement.

Then I heard somebody yelling, "Come on, Ray, you're looking good! You have 4 miles to go! You can do it! Don't give up!" It was Marva and another friend. Both of them were standing in the rain in their church clothes, cheering me on. Now, that's a friend! Marva's support got me through the next 2 miles.

But that left the final 2 miles, which turned out to be the biggest struggle of my racing career.

By mile 25 I had no energy left. I dropped into a walking pace, hoping to reserve enough power to run that last mile. As I picked up the pace a little for the last mile, the rain kept coming down harder. When I hit the home stretch, I was able to jog a bit and drag my body past the finish line. I had run a marathon! I finished in 4 hours, 28 minutes, and 26 seconds.

As soon as the medal for finishing the marathon was placed around my neck, I collapsed into the arms of two health workers, who took me to the medical tent.

While other medical attendants were helping get the cramps out of my leg, I kept trying to figure out what went wrong. The first thing that occurred to me was that I hadn't eaten anything 2 hours before the race, and my body had immediately gone into its reserves. That explains why I hit the wall too soon. The earlier leg cramps came because I had stopped too many times early in the race. And finally, I remembered that I had gone back to my old running ways at mile 16 by not pacing properly. I had ignored my friends' advice earlier in the day, and it cost me.

At first, I was disappointed with my finish. In fact, it took me several months to realize that simply finishing a marathon was a great accomplishment. Sure, I didn't like my time, but I had to start somewhere. A friend asked me if I was going to run another marathon after what I put myself through in LA.

My response? Now that I've done LA, I've raised my sights. Now I'm trying to qualify for the big race—the Boston Marathon.

With the encouragement and prayers of my friends, with direction from the Lord, and with a lot of hard work, I think I can do it.

Wouldn't Jesse Owens be proud of that!

*When he's not running up and down the streets of Riverside, California, Ray Diggs is a staff writer for The Riverside Press-Enterprise.*

## Messenger at the Marathon

In Old Testament days, long-distance runners were used as royal messengers for kings (1 Samuel 8:11; 2 Samuel 15:1; 1 Kings 1:5). They also competed with chariots and horsemen.

It should come as no surprise, then, that I was used as a messenger while in Sacramento to run in the California International Marathon. My goal was to qualify for Boston. But God had other plans. And as usual, His were better.

With 7 miles to go, I had to withdraw from the race with muscle spasms. I was taken to a hospital emergency room for treatment. While there, I had the opportunity to minister and pray for two patients: Robert, a 63-year-old terminally ill cancer patient, and Tiffany, a 15-year-old soccer player. She had suffered a broken leg while playing her sport.

Robert told me of his sufferings and that he had grown up in a Christian home but

had drifted away from his relationship with the Lord. I was able to lead him in a prayer of repentance and reconciliation. Before

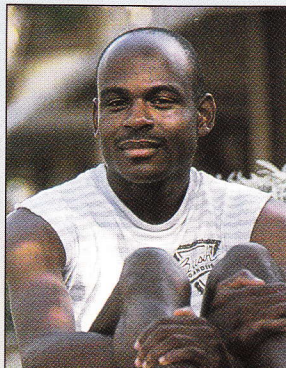
our prayer time was over, the terminal cancer patient had rededicated his life to the Lord.

After Robert was wheeled to his hospital room, I talked to Tiffany, who told me that she was also a Christian. I prayed with her too, for she was surely wondering, "Why me?" Before I left her side, I reminded her that "With God, all things are possible!"

Some might think that my trip to Northern California was a waste of time because I missed qualifying for the Boston Marathon. But I look at this trip from God's perspective: Not my will but His. "And we know that all things

work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28, NKJV).

—Ray Diggs II



COURTESY: LAURIE L. WARD

▲ **Running two races.** Writer-turned-runner Ray Diggs learned that spiritual success brings greater glory than physical honors.