

Local feeds off crowd en route to record



BILL SANDFORD FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Rick Ball, 43, beat his personal best of three hours, 10 minutes, in the Boston marathon April 20, 2009. He ran it in 3:01.50.

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Dizzy and disoriented, his body wracked with cramps, marathon runner Rick Ball threw his arms in the air and howled at the sky.

"I was screaming 'bring me in, bring me in,'" said Ball, describing the last half-kilometre of his record-breaking run in the Boston Marathon yesterday.

Ball, who lives in Orillia and works for the TTC, runs with a prosthetic leg. His time of 3:01.50 cracked the record for single amputees held by multiple record-holder Amy Palmiero-Winters. She ran the 2006 Chicago Marathon in 3:04:16.

By the time he reached the last two kilometres of the race, the 43-year-old hit what runners call "the wall," the point where your body – pushed to the limit of endurance – literally feels like it is going to shut down.

"I don't know how I did it ... I guess the crowd brought me in," said Ball.

The last stretch of the race was a bit of a blur, he said. At that point, his only goal was to finish.

"I remember the huge crowds and they were screaming. I know they were looking at my leg and screaming," he said. "They roared when I put my arms up."

What makes Ball's win so remarkable is he only started running on a prosthetic in 2007. He runs on a curved prosthetic, called a Flex-Run, made by Iceland-based company Ossur, used for long-distance running. It weighs about 500 grams and is made of a composite carbon fibre material.

Ball lost his leg in 1986 while riding his motorcycle outside Orillia. Six-metre planks of timber, strapped to an oncoming pickup truck, came loose, blew off and one hit him in the leg. He was devastated by the injury, but soon realized he was far better off than many people and now takes his story to schools where he acts as a motivational speaker.

Yesterday, TTC union president Bob Kinnear said in a statement: "We are thrilled that Rick has achieved his dream of setting a world record in the world's most famous marathon ... Besides being a world-class runner, he is also a world-class human being, who gives much of his time to inspiring and helping children achieve their own dreams. We could not be prouder that he is a member of our union."

During the race, the area of skin between Ball's prosthetic and leg became very irritated. "It got pretty sore about three quarters into the race, but I ignored it."

He said his coach warned him the Boston Marathon has "nailed a lot of people and it is to be respected.

"Basically you go at four major hills ... and it just pounds you," Ball said. "It was the hardest thing I have done in my life; worse than my accident."

After he crossed the finish line he collapsed into a waiting wheelchair, then spent about an hour getting worked on by a team of one doctor and two physiotherapists in a medical tent.

That's when someone strolled in and, noting Ball's time, said: "I think that is a record, you know."

He said he couldn't race without the support of his family, coach, his employer – the TTC sponsors him and reworks his schedules so he can train and race – and the crew who fit him for the prosthetics. "A group of people got me here," he said.

Last night, he planned to grab some food and hang out with the local police force, who gave him a ride to the race on one of their buses.

Ball said he still hopes to crack the three-hour mark and plans to run at an upcoming marathon in Mississauga or Ottawa as soon as he has recovered.

"This was all or nothing for me, I wasn't going to stop."