

## Running helps in battle vs. HIV

**Jason Taylor joined the National AIDS Marathon Training Program, and his body is fighting the virus better**

March 25, 2008

BY CAROL SLEZAK

When Jason Taylor learned last March that he was HIV-positive, he started running. Twelve months later, he hasn't stopped. With his first marathon already in the books, Taylor is looking forward to his next. But first things first. On Sunday morning, Taylor will line up with some 30,000 other runners in Grant Park to compete in the Bank of America 8K Shamrock Shuffle, otherwise known as the start of the running season. Think of it as Opening Day without the bats and balls. And Taylor can't wait.

"Oh, the adrenaline rush is remarkable," he said.

At first, running was a way for Taylor to take his mind off his diagnosis, to let off steam, to commit to a healthier lifestyle. But not long after he started training, the 33-year-old Pullman resident learned that running was providing him an added return: His T-cell count had risen and his viral load had dropped. In other words, his body was fighting the virus better. As Taylor recalls, his doctor told him, "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it." And so he has. But even without this unexpected benefit, Taylor would've kept running. He was hooked.



### Great competitor

Shortly after being diagnosed, Taylor joined the National AIDS Marathon Training Program (NAMTP), an organization that helps runners accomplish their training goals while also raising funds to fight AIDS.

In October, after completing the training program, he finished the Chicago Marathon with a time of 5:35:48. As you might recall, the race was embroiled in controversy. Unprecedented heat and humidity combined with a shortage of water had made for a tough day for many runners, with some requiring emergency medical treatment. But the heat didn't affect Taylor. He had completed the first 23 miles in 4½ hours when officials ordered the runners to walk the rest of the way. He's still miffed that he was forced to walk his final three-plus miles.

"Once I get a goal in mind, there's no stopping me," he said. "I was ready to keep running. I was feeling great. But the police ordered us to stop running. I didn't want to get arrested."

When he started training for the marathon, his friends and family thought he was crazy.

"I thought I was crazy," he said with a laugh. "But I figured, I was 32, I wasn't going to get any younger. Now I feel 21 inside. I feel good."

Taylor, a print-shop customer-service representative, credits the NAMTP with not only teaching him how to run a marathon, but providing him with a network of friends.

"It's like a family," he said.

Any aspiring marathoner or half-marathoner can enroll with the NAMTP. Men, women, young adults, beginners, veterans.

"If you want to run a marathon, we can almost guarantee that you can do it," the NAMTP's Chicago program director Steve Schapiro, who noted that the youngest runner the organization trained was 16 and the oldest was 77.

In exchange for the training, the organization asks runners to raise \$1,500 for the fight against AIDS. Since its inception in 1998, the NAMTP, which also has branches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, has trained more than 20,000 runners and raised \$80 million. (Chicago participants raise money for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago.) For many, it's a way to do something good for yourself while helping others. As the NAMTP states on its Web site at [www.aidsmarathon.com](http://www.aidsmarathon.com): "A few months of training. A lifetime of pride."

If you've never run a marathon -- and most of us haven't -- you might be surprised to hear that the basic regimen Taylor learned includes only three runs (with walk breaks) of about 45 minutes each week. Five or six months before a race, he adds a longer group run each weekend. When he first started training, he had his share of aches and pains. But they didn't last too long. Besides, it's like Schapiro, a veteran marathoner, told him: "Pain is temporary, but pride is forever."

"Before I [was diagnosed], I didn't make time for exercise," Taylor said. "It's my time to shine now. I'm not letting this thing run my life."

## **A busy schedule**

He has added yoga to his fitness regimen, as much to relax his mind as his body. And although he recently began taking medication to fight the virus, he doesn't plan to slow down. Opening Day is just the beginning. First the Shamrock Shuffle, then the Bank of America Chicago Marathon, followed by the Honolulu Marathon in December. Traveling to Hawaii will mark his first time on an airplane, and he's excited about that. He sees a lot of exciting times ahead.

"People with HIV can do anything they want," he said. "I have control of this thing. It doesn't have control of me."