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The Marathon They Almost Canceled

Ice. Wind. Sleet. Rain. Downed power lines. No-show volunteers. The minute-by-minute story of just how close organizers came to calling off the 2007 Boston Marathon, something never done in the race's 111 years.

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By Jon Marcus | April 13, 2008

The air inside the 10-by-10-foot command-post trailer was hot and still despite the icy rain and 50-mile-an-hour gusts outside. It was Sunday, April 15, barely 12 hours before the first runners would leave by bus for the town where the Boston Marathon begins, and the men and women in the trailer parked at the corner of Boylston and Dartmouth streets near the finish line watched on their TV monitors and computer screens as information poured in about falling trees and power lines, flying camera cranes and port-a-potties, and ankle-deep mud at the staging area in Hopkinton.

Twenty-to-30-mile-an-hour headwinds had been forecast for the race, with a windchill in the 20s. Over the network of radios came news that there was snow on the ground at the starting line. Engineers were worried that the photo bridge and bleachers could come down in the wind and warming tents could collapse. Days before, a television meteorologist had predicted a storm of "epic proportions" for the historic Marathon's 111th running. Media from CBS News to the Weather Channel were driving speculation to a nationwide frenzy that the famous race would have to be called off.

The people in the room - health experts, politicians, law enforcement officials - were mindful that the nation's oldest marathon had never been canceled. Most of the more than 23,000 runners, and the \$100 million they were expected to spend, were already in town. That money included nearly \$2 million in entry fees, which is combined with sponsorships and royalties to make up 90 percent of the parent Boston Athletic Association's \$7.1 million annual budget. And there was no way to postpone the race, since it takes place on Patriots Day Monday, and the next day is a workday.

The trailer was already heavy with anticipation as Kevin Burke, a former district attorney just appointed to head the Commonwealth's office of public safety, called in. Burke was the senior official, and there was a pause as someone put him on the speaker.

"So," he said, waiting for quiet. "Are we going to have the race?"

The representative of the health department urged against it. Delegates from the small towns through which the Marathon would pass were worried about their liability. Hopkinton was dragging its feet on opening the high school gym to runners and letting more tents be put up on its new athletic fields - fields built with money from the BAA - despite promises that the cost of any damage would be reimbursed. Outside, the wind howled.

AT THE AIRPORT IN ST. LOUIS, TERRY SENTINELLA WAS PLEADING with the agent at the American Airlines counter. An oil refinery worker, Sentinella is one of those even-tempered runners who don't often lose their cool. He likes to zone out as he runs along the wooded trails on the island near Seattle where he lives. Sentinella, 43, was on a quest to run a marathon in every state and had planned a "double" - St. Louis on Sunday, Boston on Monday, cashing in vacation time to do it. But he knew the weather was going to be a problem. It had been all over the news all week. He'd gotten to the airport just after the doors closed on the last flight that would leave for Boston. But he wouldn't give up.

"You've got people who are drug addicts, people who are alcoholics. I think that type of personality is what draws people like myself to running so much that it becomes part of their lives," Sentinella says. "Compulsive behavior. That's the way I am. Once I make up my mind to do something, I become obsessed with it, and that's my goal."

The Marathon They Almost Canceled was a close call - much closer than was widely known at the time - and

one of an increasing number of close calls and cancellations for running races as the weather becomes seemingly less predictable and fears of terrorist attacks and natural disasters rob life of its certainty. The same weekend that the Boston Marathon faced a winter northeaster in mid-April, the Rotterdam Marathon was stopped because of heat. Six months later, the Chicago Marathon was shut down midway because of 88-degree temperatures in October. Boston's sister race, the Oume Marathon, was canceled in February for the first time in 12 years when snow fell on Tokyo. The Mardi Gras Marathon limped to the starting line the year after Hurricane Katrina, with significantly fewer entrants and no title sponsor. Organizers of the Marine Corps and New York marathons resisted talk of canceling after the terrorist attacks of 2001, though the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington altered its course and New York City banned helicopters as runners passed the still-smoldering ground zero.

But perhaps more than any of these other incidents, what happened in Boston last Patriots Day proved the determination - the stubbornness, really - of that odd breed, the long-distance runner. It underscored the enduring and particular hardiness of New Englanders. And it was a reminder of the singular nature of the Boston Marathon and how, after 110 years, that may have begun to be taken for granted.

"Maybe to people on the outside looking in, it seems as if it's just a race. It's no big deal. But it is a big deal, especially something of the caliber of the Boston Marathon," says Dave McGillivray, the event's longtime director. "You've paid the price for nine months, or a year, or five years of training to get to the finish line. You want to see it to the conclusion. You want that medal, because you've earned it. Somebody on the outside looking in may think that's hokey. But it doesn't matter what they think. It's real. Whether this is life changing or not for you, it is for some people. That's a fact."

DEVEDA MAH MISSED THE BOSTON MARATHON IN 2006 - BECAUSE SHE was being treated at the time for breast cancer. She wanted to run anyway, but her oncologist begged her not to. "From the beginning, when I was diagnosed, I was determined that I wouldn't let this stop me from my goals," Mah says. "I wanted my life back." She returned to training even while recuperating, and ran a marathon in Calgary, Alberta, a week after finishing chemotherapy. Mah, then 47, was determined to run in Boston. She flew into town early from her home in Edmonton, Alberta. Nothing was going to go wrong this time.

Almost immediately, she heard the rumors the race might be called off.

"You'd better not," Mah remembers thinking. "'Please, God. I've been waiting for this for so long. No, don't tell me that I can't run Boston.' I had come such a long way."

McGillivray had been hunting and pecking his way to the [Weather.com](http://www.weather.com) website every few hours for days by then. And all the wishful thinking in the world wouldn't change the forecast: rain, rain, and more rain. He sent the link to everyone on his team.

Midweek, the wider world got the first hint of a problem: Channel 4 meteorologist Barry Burbank predicted a storm "of epic proportions" on Marathon Monday, with not only rain but also ice and sleet and bitter cold. Burbank was perhaps the first to wonder out loud whether the race would be run - but not the last. Calls started pouring in to the BAA offices on Clarendon Street. Would the Marathon be canceled?

The story exploded on Wednesday. Rumors were flying, even after the BAA issued a statement saying Monday's race was still a go. It did little to quell the speculation. By the end of the day, even the Weather Channel had come to town.

The Boston Marathon had never been canceled or postponed, even by snow squalls in 1925, 1961, and 1967, sleet in 1907, or 100-degree heat in 1905. In 1939, a northeaster combined with a partial solar eclipse to pitch the starting line into darkness. In 1927, it was so hot that a newly surfaced section of the course began to melt, and in 1976, temperatures reached 96, and spectators sprayed water on the overheating runners, leading that year's race to become forever known as the Run for the Hoses. In 1970, conditions were much as they were being predicted again, with heavy rain and cold temperatures.

But this time, things were different. The public expressions of confidence belied grave doubts raised in closed-door daily planning meetings, some held in the Cold War-era Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency bunker in Framingham. At 10 a.m. on Thursday, more than 150 state, local, and BAA officials packed the

bunker. The Marathon-day forecast was now for temperatures in the 30s with winds of 30 miles an hour from the east-northeast - meaning, against the runners - and a windchill in the 20s. Organizers feared thousands of cases of hypothermia that would overload the medical system. Flooding was predicted. "Does anybody think we should cancel?" someone asked. "No one wanted to be the person who says yes," a participant recalls. "They all used hypotheticals - under what conditions we might cancel. No one wanted to say it."

They were thinking it, though. They ordered extra tents, portable heaters, and 5,000 ponchos for volunteers. About 130 of the nearly 400 yellow school buses that took runners to the starting line would stay idling in Hopkinton as makeshift shelters, and more were chartered to pick up what was expected to be a record number of dropouts.

But all the preparation in the world wouldn't change the weather. And when McGillivray drove to Hopkinton on Sunday, the skies opened up, making soup of the fields where thousands of runners were to gather just a few hours later. "When I was in Hopkinton seeing what I saw, I had a pit in my stomach," McGillivray says. "It was pretty awful. I started driving back to Boston firing off phone calls left and right."

The Patriots Day parade already had been canceled. So had the reenactment of the Battle of Lexington, provoking wry comments about how lucky it was for American democracy that it hadn't rained on the first day of the actual Revolutionary War. Just under 2,500 marathoners, or about 13 percent, didn't pick up their numbers, forfeiting their \$110 entry fees. But when McGillivray appeared at the crowded runners' expo and asked if anyone there thought the race should be canceled, not one hand went up.

Tom Licciardello was listening to the forecasts, too. Licciardello, 57, was planning his 31st consecutive Boston Marathon. He'd be damned if it was going to be called off. "For those of us who live in New England, it was 'What? Rain? Wind? Cold? That's not that big a deal,' " says Licciardello, who lives in North Andover. "The Marathon has always been one of those extreme events that's within grasp of a lot of people. It's a goal they can attain. But it's a massive goal. So, for a lot of runners it's become that magic race that they have to be able to do. It becomes all you think about. It's such a big deal, and to have something as minor as weather disrupt it - that just couldn't happen."

BUT IT ALMOST DID. MCGILLIVRAY RETURNED to Boston, and after the Sunday afternoon meeting in the trailer, the weather started getting even worse. It was snowing in Hopkinton. The staging area was now a sea of mud, and 4 more inches of rain was expected. The principal organizers met again that night at the headquarters hotel, the Fairmont Copley Plaza, then briefed the BAA's board of governors, which had assembled in a conference room.

"I was as nervous, as scared, at the time as I'd ever been under race directing circumstances," says McGillivray, who has overseen some 800 athletic events. "And I was close. I was close. The statement I heard most was 'They would never cancel the Marathon.' Yes, we would. Of course we would. We were on that cusp. We were there."

At 4 a.m. on Monday, McGillivray and Tom Grilk, the BAA's president, were still talking about halting the buses, which were due to start rolling in an hour and a half, carrying the first runners to the starting line in Hopkinton. At 5, an unruffled state meteorologist gave the latest of the updates he'd been providing at six-hour intervals for nearly a week. Temperatures, he said, would warm. The rain would taper off. McGillivray called Grilk, an eloquent, Shakespeare-quoting corporate attorney with a flair for drama.

"The phone rang in the dark hours of the morning and with all of the attendant sound effects of the wind and the rain outside the Copley Plaza," Grilk remembers. It was McGillivray. "What he said was, 'I'm scared.' What I said was, 'Good. You should be. We all should be. It's an appropriate emotion. What do we do with it?'"

The men agreed that if the race was called off, thousands of athletes might try to run it anyway, without medical support or water stops or roads being closed to traffic. "So you cancel it. They're still going to show," McGillivray says. "In their minds, they've trained in this kind of weather. So you have made it almost a worse situation, and people are doing it anyway. And then you have a worse disaster on your hands."

The decision was made with just minutes to spare: The Marathon would go on.

SUSAN LYNCH WRESTLED WITH THE steering wheel as her car blew from one side to the other on the drive to catch a bus to Hopkinton that morning. "There were trees all over the road, and it was raining in sheets," she says. A government attorney, Lynch, 40, had flown from Washington, D.C., on Saturday to run the Marathon, despite the admonitions of her 85-year-old father in her hometown of Fall River. "He kept saying there's no way they're going to have this Marathon," she says. "It's going to be the worst weather in the world."

For a while, it seemed Lynch's father was right. Rain was falling in sheets. The lines of yellow school buses were backing up. A live power line was down across the course in Ashland. Volunteers didn't show up. Port-a-potties were blowing over.

But the temperatures were warmer than feared. The rain and wind subsided. The power line was removed just 10 minutes before the gun went off to start the wheelchair division. Of the 20,638 runners who began the Marathon, 98.6 percent would finish.

Susan Lynch was one. Tom Licciardello was another. Terry Sentinella never made it to the starting line; with no way to get to Boston, he slept on a cot at the airport. "A real long, motivationally draining, and financially tough weekend," he calls it. "It's like everything else in life. You've got goals. You work hard to get to that point where you can attain those goals. You've done everything just right. You've tapered, you've eaten the right foods, you've bought the right shoes, you've broken them in just right. You plan for that experience. And if you can't do it . . ." His voice trails off.

Boston and four other major marathons now are negotiating to buy cancellation insurance. The New York Marathon quietly took out cancellation insurance in the fall.

Deveda Mah finished, too, though she was disappointed with her time. She's had a second mastectomy in the meantime, and more chemo. There were complications; she needs another surgery. But she's registered to run Boston again this year.

"I'm going to be doing this Marathon," Mah says. "Whatever happens."

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