



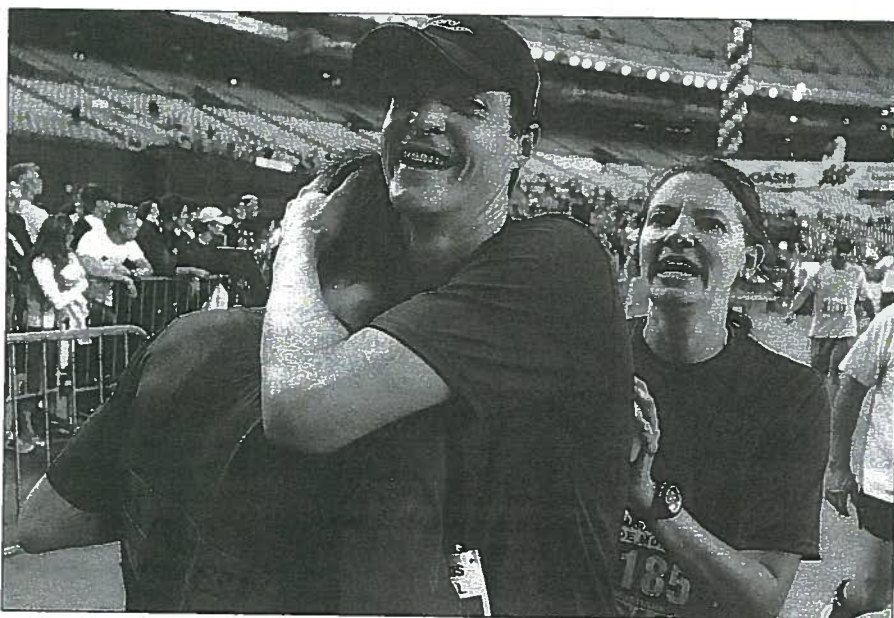
Runners participate in the annual Montreal Marathon yesterday. Kenyan Choge Julius Kirwa won in 2 hours 17 minutes 41 seconds.

PHOTOS: PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

Youth dig deep to chart new course in life

Program inspires at-risk students to run city marathon

SUE MONTGOMERY
THE GAZETTE



Against all odds: Jean-Sebastien Cronier-Larouche, 15, is congratulated by Jean-François Bemeur and Christiane Guyonneau – all participants in the Students in the Running program – after they cross the finish line in yesterday's Montreal Marathon.

At their first race – a 5-kilometre run in January – three of the youths threw up.

But yesterday, after running a gruelling 42.2 kilometres in the Montreal Marathon, underlying the cramps, blisters and aching muscles were the bolstered self-esteem and sense of accomplishment that comes with setting a goal and achieving it, no matter what the pain.

"I wanted to give myself a challenge and do something that seems impossible," said 18-year-old Jonathan Banduenga, one of 19 recruits to Students in the Running, a project to help youths 14 to 18 living in the at-risk neighbourhoods of Côte des Neiges and Hochelaga Maisonneuve to get moving, eat better and avoid heading down the wrong path. "I feel completely free and liberated now."

At the end of its first year, 13 youths were still in the program and all but one, who was injured, finished yesterday's race, some with impressive times.

Yesterday, as each youth

crossed the finish line with their running mentor, there were hugs, cheers and a few tears, as the impossible was suddenly achieved.

Pierre-Martin Aussant, a Montreal police officer in Côte des Neiges who has run five marathons, has been training all year with one of the youths and has seen a huge difference in both the runners and himself.

"They eat breakfast, for example," he said. "They've

learned how to dress in winter, because they had no idea.

"We even see a difference in their vocabulary because they often just grunt or don't talk in sentences, mainly because they don't have any adult friends."

Two or three were in special classes last year, but this year are in normal classes and their teachers say it's directly related to their running, Aussant said.

He added that it also helps

him in his job to make contact with youth in another context other than in police uniform.

"They tell their friends that as cops, we're not that bad. They see we're just like everyone else who is just doing their job."

Mentors – engineers, lawyers, teachers, firemen and translators among them – train every Tuesday and Thursday with their protégés, and Sundays at 8:30 a.m. the entire group runs together.

Youth are also expected to train on their own.

Participants must sign a contract agreeing to respect others and the training schedule, and keep up with school. If they don't, they're out. Six out of the original 19 didn't make it.

The project was the idea of Stéphane Lemay, a Montreal runner who read about a similar program in Los Angeles, and thought it could help youth here "get excited about life" and "feel more confident about their abilities and their power to make their dreams happen."

"It's very difficult for youth to run in rain and snow, but when they do it, it gives them incredible confidence."

Unlike some other sports, running costs little and is therefore accessible to low-income families, Lemay said. He hopes to expand the program into Montreal North.

Stefan Petrisor, 18, was trying in vain to soothe his cramped legs after the run yesterday, but seemed undeterred about the future.

"I will definitely do it again," he said, adding that discovering running has helped him be more organized and to focus more at school.

For more on the program, go to www.etudiants-danslacourse.org

smontgomery@montrealgazette.com

PS A4

THE GAZETTE, SEPTEMBER 6, 2010