

Joseph C. Maroon, MD: Physician and Triathlete

CHRISTINA E. MORTON

If you have ever seen the 1994 movie, *Forrest Gump*, you probably remember the unforgettable scene when Forrest starts running and keeps running—three years, two months, 14 days and 16 hours to be exact!

Joseph C. Maroon, MD, vice chairman and professor of the department of neurological surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and team neurosurgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers, is a lot like Forrest Gump in that respect, only he hasn't stopped running. At age 70, Dr. Maroon has raced in more than 70 triathlons and seven Ironman triathlons, consisting of a 2.4-mile ocean swim, 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run. The road to competing in triathlons began more than 30 years ago after he completed a one-mile run around a high school track—a run that changed his life forever.

Born in Wheeling, West Virginia, Dr. Maroon attended the University of Indiana in Bloomington on a

football scholarship. The first in his family to attend college, Dr. Maroon's father wanted him to become a lawyer, but thanks to being housed in a dormitory with a lot of pre-med majors, his career path quickly changed. Following his undergraduate education, Dr. Maroon went on to receive his medical and neurosurgical training at Indiana University, Georgetown University and Oxford University in England, then completed a microsurgical fellowship at the University of Vermont.

Dr. Maroon came to Pittsburgh in the early 1970s and practiced medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Presbyterian Hospital. In 1984 he joined Allegheny General Hospital (AGH) as chairman of neurosurgery, and in 1995 he assumed the additional role as chairman of the department of surgery at AGH/Medical College of Pennsylvania. In 1999 Dr. Maroon was recruited back to the University of Pittsburgh.

Despite an accomplished professional career, there was a time when Dr. Maroon's world was crashing down



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around him. In 1980 his father passed away, his marriage came to an end and he dropped out of neurosurgery—all within one week. Overcome by stress and suffering from depression, he moved back home with his mother and helped to take care of the truck stop that his father owned in Bridgeport, Ohio. “One day I was doing complicated brain surgery, and the next week I was filling up 18-wheelers,” says Dr. Maroon.

Four months later an old friend called and asked him if he would like to go for a run. He thought it would be helpful. “I hadn’t worked out in about three years,” says Dr. Maroon. “I was very reluctant to go, but I went and somehow made it around the quarter mile track four times. That night was the first night that I slept in four months.” He returned to the local high school track the next day and ran one and a quarter miles. The day after that he ran one and a half miles. He kept running farther and longer. “I became like Forrest Gump,” says Dr. Maroon. “I started to feel my depression lift and my energy come back. I started to eat a much better diet, and I rediscovered the spiritual aspect of things that I had lost.”

Running proved to be the best medicine for Dr. Maroon, helping relieve his depression, ease his anxiety and restore balance in his life. “I began thinking much more clearly and got some insight into what happened in my life,” says Dr. Maroon. “I came to learn that there are four important things in life: profession, family/social, spiritual and physical.” Dr. Maroon began to consciously dedicate equal amounts of time to these four elements on a daily basis. One year later, he was back in Pittsburgh practicing neurosurgery.

Eventually Dr. Maroon’s constant running began to cause wear and tear on his knees and ankles. After reading about triathlons, he bought a bike and took swimming lessons, something he had never done before. He began to cross train and eventually entered his first mini-triathlon. “Completing it was one of the most exhilarating feelings I have ever had,” he says.

Dr. Maroon has since competed in Ironman races around the world, including four in Hawaii and one each in Canada, Europe and New Zealand. The last Ironman race that he participated in took place in Kona, Hawaii, on October 9, 2010; that race is considered to be the “Super Bowl” of triathlons. Those who qualify to compete hail from 102 countries and battle an array of environmental obstacles, including extremely hot temperatures and strong cross winds.

June 2011 • Bulletin

It takes Dr. Maroon six to eight months of training to build up to the level of endurance that he needs in order to compete in an Ironman race. “I’ve done it (the Ironman) in 12 and a half hours and in 15 hours,” he says. “To do that you have to train very hard and very long, every day.”

On a typical day Dr. Maroon gets up at 5:30 a.m. and swims for an hour at the Sewickley YMCA. After operating all day or seeing patients, he will ride a bike or run for an hour after he gets home, at least four days a week. Saturdays are completely devoted to training, beginning at a low level and—by the time the Ironman race draws near—working up to swimming 2.4 miles, biking 100 miles and running approximately 18 miles. Sunday is a day of rest. When Monday rolls around, he starts the training routine all over again.

“We have no idea how much we can accomplish when we do it incrementally and consistently,” says Dr. Maroon. “Stress is good for the body as long as it’s not over done. The secret is learning how to stress your body without over stressing it, and yet doing enough to get

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Dr. Maroon also follows a strict diet that is high in fruits, vegetables, lean protein and a lot of fish, particularly salmon. Whole grains, some dark chocolate, green tea, an occasional glass of wine and appropriate supplements are also part of his diet. "You need the appropriate fuel to keep it strong and healthy and protect your immune system," says Dr. Maroon.

Describing himself as "mentally and almost physically dead" before he began exercising on a regular basis, Dr. Maroon says he believes exercise goes beyond losing weight or feeling good; it's a matter of survival. "Exercise is a much better antidepressant than any drug, and multiple studies have shown this," says Dr. Maroon. "Exercising has a much higher rate of maintaining a healthy mental and physical state than by just taking drugs," says Dr. Maroon, stressing how a level of physical activity enhances memory and concentration, and increases physical and emotional healing.

Dr. Maroon will perform approximately 400 operations this year and will see about 4,000 patients in the office. He will write six papers and travel to 10 international meetings, as well as continue his roles as team doctor for the Steelers and medical director of Pro-Wrestling Entertainment. "I could never do those things without a degree of physical fitness and mental clarity."

Dr. Maroon is convinced that, with appropriate diet, exercise, stress control and attention to environmental factors, we as a society could greatly reduce the incidence of disease in this country. "If individuals would walk 30 minutes a day, it is estimated that we could cut the incidence of diabetes by 40 to 45 percent," says Dr. Maroon. "I think we pay precious too little time to prevent disease in ourselves as well as our patients. And I think physicians have a responsibility to exemplify to their patients the optimal way to live. I take that responsibility seriously."

Dr. Maroon is currently training for an Ironman qualifier race that will take place in Indiana this July. "People say that I am crazy, but I say that I couldn't survive without it," says Dr. Maroon. "I am going to do this for as long as I can."

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