

Rob Rose - 5/3/07

The image of Chris Elgar that has been fixed in my mind comes from the 2004 Billy Kelly 5K. What impressed me about Elgar that day was how he utilized his experience as a high school coach to decipher the race calculus and set a strategy to win. The Attleboro resident was toiling away in the second tier of runners in the first mile of the Mansfield race, several yards in back of the leaders. He knew that the duo in the lead were high school runners which is his area of expertise. "Knowing the nature of high school athletes, you get a look at them and you can tell that they are anxious to get going," the Canton High School track coach said that day. "I just thought 'I'll hang back, wait a half mile, three quarters of a mile and then start racing.'" Elgar jumped the youngsters at the first mile mark and won with ease in 16:45.

One could also not forget Elgar's brash enthusiasm and bravado that November morning. Half in jest, half in earnest, he shouted, "Looks like I'm back" to the press truck occupants after he wrested the lead. It was a refreshing mix of talent, insight and articulate expression.

Another image of Elgar, captured last year, is almost as vivid. It was shortly before the start of last May's Attleboro Y 5K race and I can recall Elgar standing on the side of Mechanic St., just down from the starting line. No race for Elgar that day, as he was only a spectator, watching others from afar. Knee surgery had put him there, a disheartening position for someone who had won the Attleboro Y 5K only two years before.

"Last February (2006), it was an unusually warm day at practice and the kids convinced me to have a 'game' day," he said. "The choice was ultimate Frisbee and I had no intention of playing myself because my own running was going so well. Unfortunately I ignored logic and age and I completely tore my left ACL and also tore my meniscus. I was devastated. As soon as it occurred I knew it was bad."

He had surgery in early spring and a protracted and arduous rehabilitation ensued. "I seemed to respond quicker than most," he said of his summer of angst. "I was fanatically disciplined and followed all of the PT at home that was prescribed. I made my first running steps in July but it wasn't any form of running you could recognize. I persisted."

As the summer wafted past, Elgar began to feel the pressure of the upcoming school year and a new season of cross country. Would he be ready to be the proactive coach he had been in the past? "One motivating factor for me was to try and get some running going since cross country practice was starting in late August," he said. "I was hopeful I could run with the kids because that's just how its always been."

By October, he was back up to 30 mile weeks and the twenty pounds that he had gained was slowly melting away. "Once the cold weather set in I found I still had achiness issues and difficulty getting going," he said. "But at this point in time I have survived my first 40 plus mile week in 15 months. I am happy to be running because for a long time I sincerely believed any competitive running was never going to happen for me again. Last spring and early summer it was agony going to the races or watching the Wednesday night track workouts but my fiancée Kerri kept insisting I go. In retrospect I am glad because it kept me involved in the sport."

Elgar returned to competitive running in March when he entered the Run For Humanity 5K in Attleboro. His 18:12, fifth place finish, was a furlong off his better efforts but it was an effort. "I was honestly pleased with my time," he said. "I wanted to break 18:20 and I went out too fast but it was a good lesson because I didn't think I could go out in sub 5:30 and I found I could. I now know I still have something in me."

Next on the agenda is this Sunday's Border to Border for Meghan, where Elgar will run a leg of the 32 mile relay race for a Wampanoag Road Runner team. The question then is, can he come all the way back?

"I doubt 16:11 will ever be realistic but I plan to chase down 17:00 this fall," he said. "In the mean time I look to build off of 18:12 with hopefully a 17:30 range 5K in May in Mansfield. I want to continue to feel good and enjoy running pain free. Maybe I can come back and do something special at Billy Kelly this fall."

And just maybe, we'll hear those words uttered again. Words last heard at Billy Kelly under different circumstances three years ago. Words that will tell us that the Elgar's rehabilitation has been a success. The words? "Looks like I'm back."