



Josh Swiger stretches before a training run for the Atlantic City Marathon.

Staff photo by Jonathan Cohen

Final exam for Linwood man following 6 months of training

■ **Running:** Josh Swiger competes in his first marathon after spending a half-year working toward finishing the 26.2-mile trek.

By **BILL LeCONEY**
Staff Writer

Something is pushing Josh Swiger, something that won't let up until his legs are strands of spaghetti and his heart is playing calypso in his chest.

He wants to run until he can run no more, and then keep going until the trees and sun and houses bubble and slide across his vision like fried eggs in a pan. And then a new mystery will unfold, pushing him to the 26.2-mile finish of today's Atlantic City Marathon.

"Not to sound masochistic, but I would almost be disappointed if that (threshold) weren't the case," Swiger said. "Because that's one of the draws to a marathon, is that you have to test your will, you've got to dig down deep inside yourself and find it in yourself. I think that's what draws a lot of people to any kind of endurance

A.C. MARATHON

WHAT: 39th Atlantic City Marathon

START/FINISH: Mississippi Avenue and the Boardwalk.

WHEN: 8:30 a.m. today.

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RECORD NUMBER OF ENTRIES EXPECTED: Page D4

MARATHON MAP: Page D4

PAST CHAMPIONS: Page D4

event. It's the personal satisfaction of meeting the challenge."

Swiger's six-month odyssey of marathon training will culminate today. When he crosses the finish line on the Boardwalk at Mississippi Avenue — four hours or more after starting from the same spot — he will be defined not only as a 27-year-old attorney with a wife and two daughters, including a 3-week-old baby, but as a marathon runner.

"The goal is to finish," he said. "The

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Marathon

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longest run I've done is 2 hours and 20 minutes, so there's an hour and a half of uncharted territory here. It's going to be tough."

He knew what he was getting into. His father-in-law, Bob Paarz, ran the Atlantic City Marathon and gave him a book, "The Lure of Running." Other friends who ran marathons in New York and Philadelphia told him how to start mixing in long training runs with shorter ones, and when to start tapering down.

"It's funny," he said. "I remember when I was doing my 16-mile training runs back in June thinking to myself, 'How am I going to do another 10 miles? What was I thinking?' At the time I thought, 'OK, I'll just get better and better and better.'"

It wasn't so easy. Swiger puts in 50, sometimes 60 hours a week for his Pleasantville law firm. He often rides his bike to work from his home in Linwood, just to cram in that extra bit of exercise.

"I just tried to listen to my body and do what I felt was good for me," he said. "I've never been on any set training regimen. It's just too difficult with my schedule to not be flexible."

At 175 pounds, Swiger exercises regularly and stays on a low-fat diet. When he made the commitment to run the marathon, he had to find ways to fit the extra miles around that often-hecktic schedule.

"In the beginning I tried to save my body as much as possible," he said. "I would sometimes run twice a day, get up at 6 a.m. and do four miles, maybe ride my

bike to work, then come home and run 3-4 miles. I would do that a few times a week, then on the weekends I would do a long run. As I got closer to the marathon I would do increasingly longer runs on the weekend and increasingly less frequent work during the week but trying to throw in a long run maybe on a Wednesday."

Running expert Hal Higdon's marathon training guide states that the long weekend runs, building from six miles at first to 20 miles before tapering down in the month before the marathon, are the key to his 18-week program. "You can skip an occasional workout, or juggle the schedule depending on other commitments," Higdon writes, "but do not cheat on the long runs."

Sometimes it can't be helped. When Swiger's wife, Stacey, gave birth to daughter Molly on Sept. 25, that gave him a welcomed but difficult challenge.

"I did give (quitting the marathon) a thought for a moment, but I thought that would be crazy. I've put so much time into it already. Even if my time is not what I want it to be, it doesn't matter. The real goal is not the time but to do it, to finish."

With the arrival of a baby, sleep deprivation has become an issue.

"There was a storm the other night and she just decided to get up for three hours in the middle of the night," Swiger said. "It hasn't been debilitating at all. I'm still coming to work, but I'm definitely not getting the rest I should. My wife has been very supportive. There were times when I just had to be selfish to put in the kind of time that was necessary, but she's been really good about it. Since the new baby came around, there's been more demands on both of us."

Swiger calls the birth a "blessing in disguise" to his marathon training.

"I was getting really kind of rundown," he said. "I had done somewhere in the neighborhood of a 16-18-miler the week before she was born. I had planned to do another 18-miler the next weekend and a 20-miler the following week and then start tapering

down. Well, the weekend she was born I didn't get to do any run at all ... and I've not done more than five miles since she was born. I feel a lot fresher. My legs feel a lot better than when I was doing the long runs on the weekends, but I think mentally I have to prepare myself for the fear that I didn't run the 20-miler."

The last week of training can be the most difficult, according to long-distance expert Chuck Crabb of Mount Holly, who has won the Atlantic City Marathon five times.

"You want to be aching to go before you get out there," Crabb said. "Sometimes it's hard to cut back enough. If you're only doing a third of your normal mileage, you feel like you should be doing more. There ought to be a couple brisk runs in there. The first half of the (marathon) should feel like an afternoon jog. Take it easy, because the second half of the race you're going to be really pushing it."

Swiger said he loves pasta, so this last week of carbohydrate-loading wasn't hard to stomach. But the butterflies are also a natural presence.

"In the days coming up, some people will get nervous," Crabb said. "I like to tell them, 'You've been training for six months, you've done everything you're supposed to. Just relax, it will work out.' With any first marathon, the goal is to finish it. Go out and see what it feels like, find out what your limits are, worry about improving your time next time. The attitude should be, 'Maybe next year I'll come back and show these people.'"

Swiger said he is not a warm-weather runner, so today's marathon might be even more difficult. His wife, 3-year-old daughter Elizabeth and baby Molly will be cheering him on and handing him liquid along the way.

One more question: When it's over, will he look back on how he embraced the exhaustion threshold and kept going?

"The key phrase is 'look back on,'" he said. "I don't know how much embracing I'll be doing at mile 20 on Sunday, but I think it's definitely something I'll look back on with pride."

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The Press of Atlantic City**