



# HUMAN RACE

REAL RUNNERS, INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

## 'Running brings me solace'

Fellow runners have helped **Steve Holder** come to terms with the death of his wife >



**I**n late 2014 Steve Holder logged on to the Paris Marathon thread on the *Runner's World* forum. He was merely seeking advice about the race and tips to help him improve his PB, but what he found was – in his words – ‘a big running family’.

‘The warm welcome and unconditional support I received couldn’t have come at a better time,’ says Steve, 43, from Havant in Hampshire. His wife, Sharon, had been diagnosed with cancer in 2007, and had endured years of treatment. ‘When I signed up for Paris, she was recovering from a spell of treatment,’ he explains. ‘But early in 2015 she suffered a setback and her health declined quickly. I didn’t say a lot on the forum at the time – I just hoped things would get better.’ Tragically, they did not: Sharon died on February 24 that year.

‘I struggled to decide whether I could go through with Paris,’ says Steve. ‘It’s a place that meant a lot to Sharon and me – we’d honeymooned there, holidayed there and celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary there the year before. She’d been due to accompany me to the marathon.’

Steve mentioned his dilemma on the forum, but disclosed only that he’d been bereaved, not whom he’d lost. ‘I was new to social media and wary of saying anything more personal than that at the time,’ he says. But within an hour he’d received a string of messages filled with concern, support and sympathy. He was also invited to get-togethers before and after the race.



**FRIENDS INDEED**  
(top to bottom)  
Steve and his running friends; with his wife, Sharon; and at the 2016 Paris Marathon



away. ‘One time she did it with a walking stick,’ remembers Steve. ‘She was such a strong person. I’m more proud of her medals than I am of my own.’

It was while he was out for a run last year that Steve came up with the idea of running 20 marathons in 2016 as a kind of memorial to Sharon, marking each of the years they’d been married. ‘It seemed like a good way to raise money for the Fire Fighters Charity, the Loss Foundation and Cancer Research UK – and it would give me less time to sit and dwell on things,’ he says.

Steve’s forum friends immediately got right behind the idea – many are taking part in the races alongside him or going along to cheer him on. He’s already got six under his belt, one of which, naturally, was Paris in April. ‘It was an emotional weekend,’ says Steve. ‘I met up

## ‘I’ve formed such important friendships’

‘I was overwhelmed by the response,’ says Steve. ‘I decided to go through with it. I knew it was what Sharon would have wanted.’ The trip was unimaginably difficult, but with thoughts of Sharon in his mind, Steve ran the familiar streets of Paris in 3:39 – a PB.

Back home, he struggled to adapt to life without his wife. ‘As a firefighter, I received invaluable help, including counselling and therapy, through the Fire Fighters Charity. I still do. The Loss Foundation, which supports people who have been bereaved by cancer, has been a great help too.’

Steve’s forum friends have continued to play an important role in his life. While the Paris Marathon is the unifying theme, the thread is a year-round social network. ‘Everyone posts what races they’re doing

so others can sign up, and there are meals and other social events. There’s no elitism – everyone encourages and helps each other,’ says Steve. ‘I have formed such important friendships at a time when I most need them.’

Running itself has also been a coping mechanism for Steve. ‘Grief and depression are isolating emotions, but running brings me some clarity and solace and helps me un-jumble my thoughts. It’s a place where I feel I can be close to Sharon again. Sometimes I can almost hear her telling me to man up and get on with it!’

Sharon herself did exactly that after her cancer diagnosis. She’d never been a runner, but she signed up for Race for Life the following year and subsequently took part every year until she passed

with around 40 people from the thread, many of whom had been there with me the previous year.’

One woman who was fairly new to the Paris forum thread posted in a panic the day before the marathon that her luggage had gone astray – she had no kit to race in, her phone battery was almost dead and she had no phone charger. The news spread and by 9.30pm a message appeared: ‘Let Karen know we’ll have a complete set of running kit for her at the Arc at 7:30am.’

They did. ‘It’s the perfect example of the group’s kindness and support,’ says Steve. ‘I can’t thank them enough for the impact they’ve had on my life.’

● To make a donation, visit [virginmoneygiving.com/20marathons2016](http://virginmoneygiving.com/20marathons2016)