



**R**ight on Hereford. Left on Boylston. I can't count how many times I've heard this phrase. In Boston, we know these streets. And after last year's marathon bombings, the rest of the world learned about them as well. They are the last two turns of the Boston Marathon. Home to our public library -- where I found records of my grandfather's race results from the 1936 Boston marathon. Home to countless pubs -- many of which I stumbled out of in my early 20s. At the corner of Hereford and Boylston, you'll find Ladder 15, Engine 33 -- home to two firefighters that lost their lives in a deadly blaze this winter. And every year on Patriot's Day -- a Massachusetts holiday commemorating the first battles of the American Revolutionary War -- Bostonians assemble onto these streets by the thousands, and rally like crazy for the runners of the Boston Marathon.

This year, thanks to you, I know what it feels like to take a right on Hereford, left on Boylston with thousands of Bostonians chanting my name. But before I go there, let me start from the beginning.

**H**opkinton is a sleepy New England town exactly 26.2 miles west of Boston. And at the crack of dawn on the morning of April 21st, a bus drove the MIT Strong team to the Athletes Village in Hopkinton.

There are 39 of us on the MIT Strong team. Some, like me, are on the MIT staff. Others are MIT students or alumni. Some knew Sean Collier well through the MIT Outing Club (he was an active member) or the MIT Police Department. As I looked around the bus, I was overwhelmed with emotion for the fascinating mix of people

I had come to know as my MIT Strong teammates: a former Navy submarine commander, a grad student developing bomb-sniffing technologies, an engineer at MIT's central utility plant, a survivor of last year's bombing...among others. Over the course of our winter training, we became very close. One thing united us: we were passionate about running the marathon in Sean's memory.

We had been hydrating so much for the past few days that we hop off the bus in Hopkinton and immediately jump into line at the port-o-johns. It is sunny, but cold. Very cold. So, on top of our running clothes, we wear disposable layers to keep us warm. One of my teammates is wearing flannel moose pajamas -- and he's getting a *lot* of compliments. When our waves/corrals are called, we strip down to our MIT STRONG running gear and leave the warm stuff behind (the city of Hopkinton



At the 10k mark in Framingham. Photo: Ho Yin Au

is donating the clothing to a local shelter). Many of us fail to put on sunscreen, because, why would we? After all, we'd been training in the polar vortex all winter. What's a little sun, right? Wrong. More on that later.

When my corral is called, I begin walking the half mile towards the starting line. And that's when things start to feel very, very real. Walking shoulder to shoulder with tens of thousands of other runners, my nerves kick in...and that's when I see the first MIT STRONG sign. I think: who in the world has a giant MIT STRONG sign in Hopkinton? It is my sister Kelly. She made the trek out to Hopkinton with her husband to cheer me on. Clutch. That's one word to describe my sister.

It would be the first of many, many MIT STRONG signs along the route, but one of the most memorable. It means so much to me that my sister would do that -- and it gives me the confidence I need to start the biggest race of my life.

**T**he first thing I notice is the police and National Guard presence along the marathon route. Hopkinton and Ashland are quiet, rural towns with beautiful rolling hills, stone walls and historic homes. I ran the route many times during my winter training, but the runs were lonely and cold. Today, the sun is shining, thousands of people line the route, and national guardsmen give me high fives as I run past them. I am pumped.

But by the time I reach Ashland, I realize this race won't be anything like my winter training runs. It is now 20 degrees warmer than any of my previous runs and there



*Me and a random guy at the top of Heartbreak Hill. Photo: Henry Hall*

isn't a single cloud in the sky. I begin to wonder whether I should drink more water or slow down. After all, I still have 22 miles to go. My goal pace for the marathon is 9 1/2 mins/mile - I decide to slow down to 10 mins/mile. Later, the heat will force me to slow down even more.

**F**ramingham is the third town and 10 kilometers into the marathon route. After running through the bucolic sleepy towns of Hopkinton and Ashland, Framingham is a shocking wake-up call - it's blue collar, it's industrial, and it's packed with the loudest, most awesome marathon supporters ever. This is where I see my first WICKED STRONG signs. DON'T POOP YOUR PANTS signs. And, of course, COLD BEER: 20 MILES AHEAD signs. But best of all, head and shoulders above the rest, is my son...sitting on his daddy's shoulders, holding an MIT STRONG sign and screaming for me. This is also the first time I see my mom. She gives me that "I'm so proud of you" look, and I feel a lump form in my throat. I give them all sweaty hugs and run on - with new energy and motivation. I can do this.

**N**atick. It's town number four on the marathon route and damn, it's getting hot. The sun is right above me and the temps are soaring. This is where I start refilling my water bottle and I open my first stash of Honey Stinger Energy chews. But, the water isn't as refreshing as I'd like and the chews are making me feel...well, nauseus. I ignore these signs and keep running.

By Natick Center I see my amazing friends, Jen and Lisa, and their beautiful

son Shay on the sidelines. I stop. I hug. I gush at Shay's cuteness. I wish, for a moment, that I could jump the rope and just hang with them...ditch the race all together and catch up on old times. But, I turn my attention back to the race, despite the nagging naseau. I walk, for the first time, just to let my stomach settle. Then, my favorite Bruce Springsteen song comes on my headphones, and suddenly the nausea is gone (or I'm just ignoring it), and I run on.

**E**ntering Wellesley. I read the sign and I smile. This is "Swellesley" -- the tony town filled with Mercedes, fancy shops I could never afford to enter, and a much-welcomed shady and gradual downhill. I know it is short-lived. Wellesley is the calm before the storm. It's the last downhill before Newton's Heartbreak Hill and the final cruel stretch into Boston, but I'm happy. It's hot as hell and I'm giddy about finding shade (finally!) and reaching the halfway point. I have AC/DC Thun-



*My biggest supporter, Will, at Mile 20 in Newton.*

derstruck blasting on my headphones. I'm singing. This is really fun. I begin to wonder whether I'm losing my mind.

After passing through downtown Wellesley, I see my cousin Kerry on the sidelines. I'm blown away by the fact that I've seen family or friends in every town on the route so far. Not sure she appreciates my sweaty hug, but I give it to her anyway. Her words of encouragement give me the motivation I need to face the dreaded hills of Newton. Bring it on.

**N**ewton Lower Falls. It's the beginning of a 5-mile grueling uphill journey into Boston. After crossing the Charles River, there's an unnaturally steep incline over I-95. But at the top of this first hill is Sgt Cheryl Vossmer of the MIT Police Department waving an MIT STRONG sign. She's handing out licorice, pretzels and heartfelt hugs to me and other team members of MIT STRONG. We hug. I cry. And she tells me to keep running -- to kick ass. I will. For her. And for Sean.

I run past Newton-Wellesley Hospital, where Will was born nearly seven years ago. Holy crap, I think, time has flown. And I take a right onto Commonwealth Avenue, past a giant BOSTON STRONG sign that hangs on the Newton fire station. The roar of the crowd is getting louder. And then, like something in a movie, Sean Collier's favorite song comes on my headphones. I surge up the second hill.

At Mile 19, I'm feeling the heat, the hills and the nausea. And I see my friend Emily -- waving like a crazy person, telling me I'm almost there, and that I look strong.

I know I probably don't, but her support nearly makes me cry. She's the one who drove me to Hopkinton for my long runs throughout the winter. She picked my sweaty, tired body up whenever I needed her. And she supported me when I thought I couldn't do it. We hug. I run on.

At Mile 20, I see my whole family. Will is still holding the MIT STRONG sign and, when he sees me, he jumps up and down and does a happy dance. Then I see Chris. My mom. My sister. Jeannie -- the woman who cared for Will from age 1 to 4. Other friends from Newton. I'm overwhelmed. And just before the infamous Heartbreak Hill -- the third of four killer hills -- I see my work colleague, Gayle -- she greets me with a hug, words of encouragement, and a York Peppermint patty. I'm ready for Heartbreak Hill.

Here's the thing. I don't remember much about the infamous hill. I remember that it hurt. That it was hot. And that it seemed to go on forever. I know I ran most of it, but I'm sure I walked some too. I remember hearing people scream my name. Scream for MIT STRONG. I remember seeing medical tents packed with ailing runners. But my memory is mostly hazy...until I approached the crest of the last hill.

I see another oversized MIT STRONG sign and I know it is my colleague, Henry. Seeing him and his giant sign gives me extra gas in the tank. I sprint up the last hill. Next to Henry is a police officer from the Plymouth Police Department (photo on previous page). You'd think we were best friends the way he is screaming for me and motivating me to run the last 6 miles into Boston. This is what the Boston Marathon is about. I give him a hug too, and I run with a huge smile on my face downhill (finally!) towards Boston College. I can see the Prudential Center in the distance -- for the first time, the finish line is in sight.

My teammates warned me not to drink the "water" that the BC students were handing out. But the idea of a cold beer or a nip of vodka don't seem too bad at Mile 21. After some (delusional) consideration, I decide pass on the alcohol and make the final push into the city.

As I run down Beacon Street, the memories of my post-college years come flood-

ing back to me. Riding the T. Hitting the pubs. Fenway Park in the summer. Man, I love this city.

It's Mile 23 and the crowd is insane. If I slow down at all, the spectators seize on my weakness and chant my name -- Julie keep running, you look strong, you can do this Julie. Run!

This is what they talk about. This is when you don't think you can take another step, but somehow you dig deep and you put one foot in front of the other. Crap, this hurts. Gatorade tastes like hell. Water isn't going down easily. Forget the chews. My body is shutting down. I think of Sean. I run on.

Then I hear my name and see someone waving wildly on the sidelines. It's my friend Jackie -- we haven't seen each other in years, but she generously supported the Collier Memorial Fund and spread the gospel of my fundraising efforts on Facebook. I hug her and try to find the words to thank her. But my brain is fried. I take another 20 steps. I hear my name again. It's another old friend. Geez, they're everywhere. I remember drinking pints of Guinness with Annie years ago. She looks great. I probably don't. Who cares. She's cheering me on. We hug. I run on.

Past Fenway. Into Kenmore Square. Oh my God. Can it get any louder? Are they cheering for me? Yes, I think they are. Wait, is this Mile 25? Am I *this* close? Who are these people? Do I know them? They're cheering for me like I *know* them. Maybe I know them. I high-five every single person I see. I'm completely delirious.

Mile 26. I see Will, Chris, and my mom at the Mass Ave bridge. I wave like a lunatic. How is this possible? I've just run 26 miles. I'm almost there.

Right on Hereford. Left on Boylston. 0.2 miles to go. I don't feel my legs. Am I moving? What happened to my music? I don't hear it. All I hear is the sound of thousands of people chanting MIT and screaming my name. I yank the headphones out of my ears and try to hear and feel as much as I can. I look at the faces in the crowd. I feel my heart beating out of

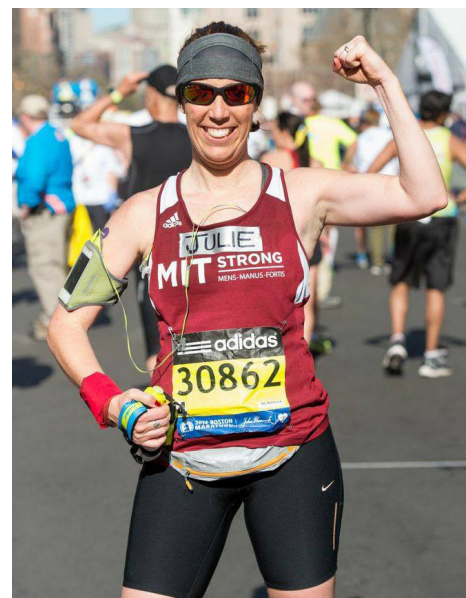
my chest. Somehow, my legs keep moving and I turn left on Boylston.

I see the finish line in the distance (it seems a lot further away than I remembered!). I pass the Forum Restaurant, where the second bomb exploded last year. I feel tears streaming down my face. I pick up the pace. I see the Boston Public Library. I think of my grandfather. More tears. I see Marathon Sports, where the first bomb exploded. The roar of the crowd is deafening. I see the photo bridge. I see the finish line. I think of Sean. I throw my hands up into the air and I tell my body to run as fast as I can. I'm probably crawling. I have no idea. I try to scream but there's nothing left in me. I finish.

Almost immediately, medics find me and ask if I'm ok. Of course I'm fine! I just finished the Boston freakin' Marathon -- I'm great! Where's my medal? But then I begin to wonder, *am* I ok?

Within a few steps, I begin to feel strange things happening in my body. Blood is rushing to my feet. Sounds are muffled. The sky is an electric blue -- a color I swear I've never seen before. Then the sound comes back, the world starts to look normal again, and the pain rushes in. My hips. My feet. And ouch -- the worst possible sunburn on the backs of my arms and legs. But I keep moving. And smiling.

I did it.



Seconds after crossing the finish line.  
Photo: Justin Knight