

Man vs. Lyme: Ironman steps up to battle disease

Contributed by John Kovach
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Health and fitness experts urge those getting in shape to walk 10,000 steps a day.

New Canaan resident Carl Asker will soon run 200 miles — at once — to raise awareness and money for the fight against Lyme disease.

Asker is training for his first 200-mile ultramarathon, to be held in Pittsfield, Vt., November 6. He has dedicated his run, and all of the training runs preparing for it, to promote awareness for Lyme disease research by running under the banner “There is hope! — Team TFL” in honor of Time for Lyme, Inc., a Lyme disease advocacy and education foundation in Greenwich.

As part of his training — and his efforts to raise money for and awareness of Time for Lyme — Asker will run around the track at New Canaan High School for 24 hours this week, starting at 5 a.m. Saturday.

The public may visit the track and is invited to run intervals alongside him.

After running to a recent interview in Waveny Park, Asker said the theme of his effort is “Man vs. Lyme,” and that he advocates research into methods to better detect the disease, as well as alternative forms of treatment.

The father of three began running at the age of 37.

At the age of 40, he started participating in triathlons — day-long races involving swimming, bicycling and running.

His real challenge came in 2006, when he contracted Lyme disease.

Asker was training for a 140-mile triathlon in Nice, France, when he woke up one morning with a giant insect bite that developed into the classic bull’s eye rash indicative of Lyme disease. Then, he got really sick. He was chronically fatigued and fell asleep during the day. His joints — knee, wrist, and hip — ached nonstop. He had a throbbing headache and stiff neck that could not be relieved with over-the-counter pain relievers. He experienced heart palpitations, drenching night sweats, and worst of all, he said, nervous electrical shocks that caused spasmodic head and neck jerks.

The first doctor who treated him did not test for tick-borne illnesses, but put him on a four-week course of antibiotics that triggered a severe toxic reaction known as “Herxheimer’s reaction,” which mimicked a heart attack. After a month on medication, the symptoms persisted, and a second doctor conducted a Western blot test which indicated that Asker not only had Lyme disease, he also had another tick-borne disease called Ehrlichiosis that made the Lyme disease even more difficult to treat.

“What makes this intracellular disease so complicated are the many various strains and co-infections with other tick-borne diseases, such as TBE (tick-borne encephalitis) and Ehrlichiosis,” Asker said.

After more unsuccessful treatment, he was ultimately inserted with a long catheter in his arm through which he self-injected still more antibiotics.

“The most agonizing part of this whole ordeal was that it was so hard to get conclusive test results from the diagnosis, or to find out whether the medications were working,” he said in a release from Time for Lyme. “This is truly a fickle and complicated disease. Why aren’t there any tests that can give accurate diagnoses, once and for all?”

“We need a different and more robust testing method,” he continued.

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Asker and similar outdoor sports enthusiasts are among those constantly exposed to the threat of Lyme.

As a father of three, he worries about increasing risks to young children. "People don't realize how small these ticks are (poppy-seed sized in the potent nymph stage), and how hard it is to detect them," he said.

Asker was feeling better by September, 2007, and began training for ultramarathons — extreme distance events which expose competitors to rough terrain and weather.

Kevin Cowser is helping Asker train and acting as a sort-of pit crew during races such as the recent Pittsfield Peaks 53 Mile Ultra-Challenge. Cowser checks on Asker's nutrition, hydration, equipment and general health during the events.

After his 24-hours circumnavigating the New Canaan High track, Asker will run the 26.2-mile Hartford Marathon October 11.

All the training will be put to the test November 6 at the Vermont 200-Mile Endurance Run, a timed 72-hour race up terrain that reaches an elevation gain of 30,000 feet. More information can be found at newenglandultras.com.

"This race symbolizes the quest for more research which has been and continues to be an endurance race. It takes preparation and persistence," Asker said.

"We are so proud to support Carl's commitment and inner strength to undertake such a grueling athletic challenge and thrilled at his efforts to create awareness about the serious nature of Lyme disease", said Diane Blanchard, co-president of Time for Lyme.

More information can be found at timeforlyme.org.