

Celebrating something even greater than the Stanley Cup

Perry Newman
President, Atlantica Group LLC
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This week, while most of us are focusing on our own upcoming Independence Day, Canada on July 1 will observe its 144th birthday.

Canada Day and indeed Canada generally tend not to occupy our thoughts to any significant extent in this country. But Canada has been much on my mind these past weeks, and not merely because the Bruins defeated the Canucks to win the Stanley Cup.

Canada and Vancouver in particular have been on my mind since I saw the news that Betty Fox had died.

Betty Fox was the mother of Terry Fox, whose courage, strength and determination remain the stuff of legend. Indeed, the Terry Fox story is one so moving and in its way so emblematic of what is right about Canada – its humility, its generosity, its ability to punch above its weight – that it more than bears retelling.

Born in Manitoba, Terry Fox was raised in the Vancouver suburb of Port Coquitlam. A dogged high school basketball standout who excelled due to effort as much as talent, he took up distance running at the suggestion of his coach.

During his first year at British Columbia's Simon Fraser University, however, Fox was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, an aggressive form of bone cancer that had begun to develop in his knee. Doctors recommended amputation of his leg followed by chemotherapy, advising him that his chances for survival would be greatly enhanced.

So Fox underwent the surgery that removed his leg above the knee and endured sixteen months of chemotherapy. During the course of his treatment, and as many of his fellow patients died, he began to consider what might be done to increase cancer awareness and raise funds to support further research.

Inspired by the story of an amputee who had completed the New York Marathon, and mindful of

the need for increased research funding, Fox began to train not merely to complete a single marathon, but essentially to run a marathon every day – every day – beginning in Newfoundland on Canada’s east coast and crossing the breadth of Canada to finish at the Pacific Ocean in British Columbia. His goal was to raise one dollar from every Canadian, \$24 million at the time, to support cancer research. He called the effort the “Marathon of Hope.”

In April 1980, dipping his prosthetic foot in the icy Atlantic, Fox began his distinctive hop-stride journey across the country. He encountered snow, gale-force winds and heavy rains in the early days of his run. His efforts were frequently ignored and he struggled not only with the physical beating that the run imposed on his body, but with demoralizing public apathy and an early lack of response to his fundraising efforts.

Yet he continued the slog, fighting traffic, enduring the pain and slowly making his way across the Maritimes and into Ontario. Along the way he spoke to any group that would listen; he met with other cancer patients, he gave interviews to the smallest newspapers and the largest television stations. Eventually, he began to attract the public’s attention, and by the time he reached Toronto, he had succeeded in focusing the nation on cancer and on the need to fund cancer research.

He had raised more than \$1 million when tragedy struck.

Just outside Thunder Bay, Ontario, in September 1980, Fox experienced an uncharacteristic shortness of breath, coughing fits and unusual pain. Rushed to the hospital, he later emerged on a gurney, tearfully informing reporters that the Marathon of Hope was suspended; he would be returning home for treatment. His cancer had begun to spread.

Notwithstanding the treatments, but after completing more than 3,300 miles of his run across Canada, Terry Fox died, on June 28, 1981.

No column can do justice to Fox’s grit or passion, nor does space permit a deeper discussion of Betty Fox’s insistence that her son’s legacy not become “corporatized.” Suffice it to say that today, Terry Fox Runs take place around the world, and the Terry Fox Foundation has raised more than \$500 million for cancer research.

In the end, what makes a nation, if not its citizens? What defines national character, if not the extraordinary deeds of ordinary people?

This week, which marks both the anniversary of Terry Fox’s untimely death and the celebration of Canada’s birth, I propose to raise a Molson to our friends to the north.

Courage, character and compassion are shared values that transcend our shared border, and are cause for celebration in Boston, Vancouver and all points in between.

Happy birthday, Canada.



Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

2000 Barrington St., Ste. 1302 Cogswell Tower,
Halifax NS B3J 3K1
phone: (902) 429-1143 fax: (902) 425-1393
E-Mail: aims@aims.ca <http://www.aims.ca>