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Bracing for a marathon

Allard USA in Rockaway part of support team for runner

BY MATT MANOCHIO
DAILY RECORD

Friday, March 9, 2007

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ROCKAWAY -- The way Beth Deloria tells it, her neurosurgeon discovered a "perfect storm of birth defects" surrounding her spine in May 2004.

She had ruptured discs and spondylolisthesis -- when one vertebrae slides forward on the spine and the surrounding vertebrae collapse. She also had spina bifida occulta, a mild form of the disease in which some vertebrae are not

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Deloria, of Greensboro, N.C., now 40, is an account manager for a marketing and design firm. She had always been athletic and had run marathons. She always experienced pain when she ran. But it became unbearable, which led to two surgeries that left her unable to walk.

She devoted 2005 to teaching herself how to walk again. It was a Rockaway company on Pine Street that helped her learn how to run.

In another month, she'll be in the Boston Marathon.

"I was a runner beforehand --my first marathon was at age 35," Deloria said Thursday.

Deloria was visiting Allard USA on Pine Street to meet with officials of the company that made her a special, lightweight brace that helps to correct "foot drop." Spondylolisthesis had damaged a nerve in her left leg, leaving her unable to walk heel to toe, meaning she would have to drag her foot in order to walk.

Allard developed an "ankle foot orthosis," a 5-ounce brace made of Kevlar, carbon fiber and fiberglass. It's a footplate that slips into a shoe, with a strut extending from the plate that winds around the ankle and connects to another plate on the foreleg for added support.

"I can walk without it," said Deloria, who began wearing the brace last year. "But the risk is tripping, which I do a lot if I'm not wearing it."

Now instead of dragging her foot, Deloria can use her body's energy to propel her left leg forward.

Carol Hiemstra-Paez, Allard's manager, described it as a "dynamic response, it's almost like a diving-board effect," like taking a step with the leg springing upward.



JOHN BELL / DAILY RECORD

Beth Deloria puts on a lightweight brace made of Kevlar designed to correct 'foot drop.' The brace helped Deloria qualify for the Boston Marathon after a three-year break in marathon running.

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Deloria first ran the Chicago Marathon in 2001 with a time of three hours, 44 minutes and 34 seconds. She returned to Chicago for her first post-surgery marathon last Oct. 22 and finished in three hours, 39 minutes and 26 seconds, which qualified her to run in the Boston Marathon on April 16.

The races are 26.2 miles.

In Chicago, "I just turned to the starting line and I broke down crying," Deloria said of making it back to where she wanted to be.

Her last competitive race prior to that was in 2003. In that three-year gap between her marathons, she couldn't even walk.

"It seems like 10 years ago," she said. "It was a long road back."

Part of that journey involved the Internet. Deloria went online to visit Web sites related to her condition and posted questions asking if anyone knew of braces that could help her walk more comfortably. She already had a brace, but wasn't satisfied with its weight and maneuverability.

"I could walk and run," she said. "(But) it was so uncomfortable," she added about the chafing that occurred every time she ran.

Deloria received 70 replies to her e-mail, including one from Hiemstra-Paez.

The two began a dialogue and Deloria eventually was fitted by her doctor in North Carolina for an Allard ankle foot orthosis, which was made in Sweden and delivered to her last spring.

The difference between the two braces was night and day, Deloria said.

"It is ... riding a scooter versus driving a Mercedes," she said.

Hiemstra-Paez said the types of braces developed by Allard USA -- the North American headquarters, and a division of the Swedish firm, Camp Scandinavia -- are commonly used by people recovering from strokes, or patients with multiple sclerosis or neurological ailments including side effects of spinal cord surgery.

Hiemstra-Paez said the devices range in price from \$900 to \$1,200.

A brace that's only a few ounces lighter than an older model might not seem like a huge improvement, but



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Hiemstra-Paez said it means the world.

"For someone who's neurologically impaired, it's a big difference," she said.

Deloria said she was a soccer player in high school, and played club soccer while attending the University of North Carolina. She took up running to keep in shape, and set her mind to longer distances, eventually leading to marathons.

She was 35 when she told herself, "I want to run a marathon before I'm 40."

Deloria has a couple of plans for her life after the Boston Marathon, including more local running and devoting time to inform others with her condition that there is help out there for more comfortable walking and running.

Deloria said she used to think running wasn't especially exciting, but she liked the satisfaction of finishing. When her back problem erupted, it changed her perspective.

"I didn't realize how much I liked it until I couldn't do it anymore," she said.

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