

Marathon: A Metaphor for Life

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A charge was in the air among the 3,002 Italian participants of the New York Marathon. Among them was Sandro Gozi, Undersecretary of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. We interviewed him about what it means to run a marathon in New York only a few hours after a terror attack and what physical activity can mean, above all for young people, in terms of the commitment that allows an



individual to achieve a certain goal.

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Only a few days have passed since the New York Marathon. This year there was a lot of talk about the large number of Italian participants, and the hashtag #lacaricadei3002 (literally translated “The charge of 3,002”) is a pretty strong indication of the Italian presence.

We were delighted to discuss it with one of the participants, Sandro Gozi, the Undersecretary of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This year, as he has been doing for the past several years, he ran the infamous 42,195 meters across Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx before reaching the finish line in Manhattan.

When you arrived in New York only 10 days ago, the terror attack in TriBeCa had already occurred. What was your state of mind when you participated in the marathon?

My state of mind was that I had no doubt about coming to New York, bringing my family, and participating. It was the best way to respect New York, the New Yorkers, and the victims of that terrible attack.

New York is so strong. Its reactions to tragic events, both this time and in the past, are a testimony to that. New York has won the challenge against violence because it retains normalcy. People go on without giving up daily lives, their values, and their freedom.

This makes New York a highly admired city across the world. The Marathon is a choice of freedom, especially this year, as it took place only a few days after the attack.

What was New York like when you arrived?

You could see there were more checkpoints, but I felt the beautiful New York atmosphere, which is one that continues to be true to itself. The New Yorkers continue to be themselves, and they don't give up their identity.

This is the best way to defend yourself and to defeat the barbarians who are involved in terrorist groups or who act as lone wolves. You need to remain true to yourself, hold on to your identity, maintain your daily life, and not lose your freedom.

Let's not forget that even right after the attack, they organized a Halloween parade...

Absolutely, it's the same logic. The right logic.

I wanted to bring my kids to Ground Zero, also for the museum, and to have them see, in person, what the New Yorkers saw. They weren't born at that time.

I find that the tale that lives in that space is the best way for New York to protect its values, respect the victims, and also respect the survivors of that terrible morning...

I want my kids to understand what September 11 was and how, at the time, the New Yorkers and the world had reacted. Your question allows me to tell this aspect, which was part of our life in New York.

There were more than 3,000 Italians in New York, and we even had a hashtag. What did being a part of this great Italian team in New York mean to you?

I was very happy and proud. It was a celebratory moment. It all went well for everyone, and I'm happy that once again, the Italians showed friendship with America, the United States, and New York with enthusiasm for what I believe remains the most important marathon in the world.

You're also part of the “Montecitorio Running Club.” What exactly is it?



It's a group that was founded with other members of Parliament several years ago. It came some other times to New York, and it always used the public role to fundraise for charity.

We wanted to send a message: physical activity is good for you, and it's important to stay in shape. Being active is important for our health and for our daily lives. When you have a public role, you can work on social solidarity projects, especially thanks to sports.

In the past we collected funds to reconstruct schools in Abruzzo and in Emilia after the earthquake and to support the initiatives of the Fondazione Don Orione in Naples. Hence, we've tried to put our public role as members of Parliament and our passion for physical activity to good use towards social objectives.

One year there were 30 of us members of Parliament. This year it was just me and Maurizio Lupi, but the goal of the Montecitorio Running Club remains the same: to prove that even when you're doing a challenging job, and you have a public role, physical activity is important. They're important in your daily life, and they're important as a message.

You have a very active life. How do you do it? How do you train?

In fact, I think this is the first time that I active member of the government has participated in the Marathon. I work out early almost every morning. I wake up between 6 and 6:15, and I usually get my exercise on the Lungotevere in Rome or at Villa Borghese.

I travel a lot both in and outside of Europe, but no matter what city I find myself in, I always bring running shoes. No matter where I am, I go running in the morning. I find that it's the best way to get in touch with the territory and to see the city differently. These are places I might have to hold negotiations, a convention, or a political meeting.

Also, in the morning, the cities show their true colors, and I get to know them better.

What is the either the nicest or the most different place where you've ever run?

The most original place where I've ever run was in New Delhi, India. I ran out of the Gateway of India. It was the morning, and there was this unusual fog, so you could couldn't see much. It was an intense experience for me. This was before going to pay tribute to Ghandi's tomb as a representative of the Italian parliament.

What was your first marathon?

My first marathon was in New York in 2007.

You told me you have kids. Have they followed you in this New York endeavor?

Of course. Federica is 14, and Giulia is 11. They were present and active at the Italian Corner, which was situated at the 23rd mile on Fifth Avenue. Francesco Genuardi, the Consul General in New York, was there with his wife Isabel, and my wife Manuela was there as well. With them was a group of Italians who were cheering on the various Italian runners.

What historical moments regarding marathons do you remember the most? My father often spoke to me about Abebe Bikila. It was 1960 in Rome, and I still hadn't been born.

Actually, my father also told me about Abebe Bikila who ran barefoot in Rome in the 60s.

Evidently, our parents' generations were a lot more struck by this; I remember this black and white photo of a runner of color who was running barefoot. Like you, this is a paternal story for me too. It was the first introduction in my family to the marathon.

I also remember Dorando Pietri who was about to win the marathon in London. He fell a few meters from the finish line, and someone helped him up. When he got to the finish line, he was disqualified



because someone helped him back up.

This is another one of those true stories about the marathon that I often think of. I must say that this year especially, I was really thinking about it. The last kilometer and a half, I was really suffering, and I thought, “You can’t be like Dorando Pietri. You can’t stop near the end.”

On a personal level, are you happy with the time that you achieved in this marathon?

I’m very happy. My personal time is 3 hours, 27 minutes. In New York, I did it in 3 hours, 38 minutes, but I must say that after several years, it was a race that I managed well. Even though I did have some inevitable difficulties, I never had extreme points of suffering.

I would like to end by speaking about the young people because sports are important for them. But there’s something more in the marathon.

We spoke about Abebe Bikila. There was something symbolic in the way in which he ran the marathon. There’s this challenge with yourself, but at the same time you’re part of a current of people around you. What do you think is a message that we can give the others?

The message to the young people is that you need to commit and to work in order to see results. The Marathon is a year-long commitment if you are looking to get a good time.

“42km of running? How does anyone do that?” It might seem impossible, but it’s a goal that can be reached if you’re disciplined, tenacious, and if you train. You need to challenge yourself. If you study yourself deeply and put yourself to the test, you’ll see that there are very few obstacles that you can’t overcome.

You’re also part of a community. The Marathon is beautiful, not simply because you run 42km as an individual but it’s even more beautiful because there’s a great community of runners from all over the world who make the Marathon a special event. Even when you set an individual goal, you can really grasp the beauty of the goal when you realize that you belong to a larger community.

These are the messages. The Marathon is a metaphor for life.

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