

## **Wharton Runs Against Cancer**

by Alex Edmans

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Wharton MBAs have tremendous demands on their time: academics, recruiting, extra-curriculars ... and perhaps the odd party. But, an incredible group of Wharton students – mainly first-years who were still busy settling in, navigating the auction system, and fending off the advances of sketchy second-years – chose to devote some of their time to take on a challenge that was not only a huge personal stretch experience, but also would help others.

Outside of my day job at Wharton, I'm honored to serve as head running coach for DetermiNation Philadelphia, the endurance athletics program of the American Cancer Society. In previous years I'd seen Wharton students excel in pushing themselves outside their comfort zone – summiting Cotopaxi volcano, performing stand-up comedy, or falling only nine times during a hockey game – and others still sacrifice their time to help others, such as the WIVP, Rebuilding Together, and mentoring a classmate interested in switching careers. So I thought that students might aspire to combine the two – running a half or full marathon to raise money to fight cancer.

The WGA kindly gave DetermiNation a slot at the Club Fair, even though we're not a Wharton club. Stationed right next to the newly-formed and much more appealing Cocktail Club, I feared that we'd attract little interest, but I was touched by the number of students who wanted to join our cause. From the initial sign-up list I expected that 2-3 would commit – that's the typical size of a fundraising team given the \$1,000/person fundraising minimum – but 11 gutsy students joined the Wharton Against Cancer team. Most of them had never run a half-marathon before, and stretched themselves even further by adding a fundraising target to the physical challenge.

Why did they do it? Eoin Condren (WG '14) explained: "I ran the race for the challenge. I never imagined before I came to Wharton that I'd be donning my running shoes and shorts but we've been told enough times that these two years are all about stretch experiences. Like most people, cancer has touched me but I'm one of the lucky ones (touch wood); those closest to me who have suffered from cancer have thankfully survived and now live happy and normal lives. As a result, I've seen first-hand the wonders modern medicine and research can achieve. If the American Cancer Society can continue in its mission, we will continue to see an increase in happy stories like the ones I am able to tell." Borja Deniz (WG '14), the fastest WAC student in the half-marathon, noted: "Because, unfortunately, cancer is a disease that affects millions of people in the world ... being at Wharton is a recognition and an opportunity for me, and I believe we have more responsibility than others to be aware of the problems in the world and try to do significant things."

We were joined in the team by Amy Chiu (WG '13), Jenn Doran (WG '14), Zurine Eguizabal (WG '14), Brent Frissora (WG '13) and his mother Jenny, Nicole Hong (WG '14), Max Kretchmer (WG '14), Lane Rettig (WG '14), Eva Wang (WG '13), and Ying Wang (WG '14).

We were amazed at the generosity of our classmates and colleagues. They helped Wharton Against Cancer raise over \$15,700 to fund cancer research, treat current patients, and prevent cancer. Their donations will help thousands of people who they will never meet and who will never get the chance to thank them. At the pre-race dinner, DetermiNation kindly presented us awards for being the top fundraising team.

Race morning came around, and there was a special feeling among the Wharton athletes as we warmed up together at 6:30am. Before Wharton we were consultants, policymakers, software developers; we hailed from Ireland, Korea, Spain. But in the freezing morning, we were in the same blue T-shirts and united by a common goal. Today, all the months of squeezing training runs into an already-packed schedule would pay off.

Everybody crushed it. After I finished my race (I was only doing a half), I jogged back to the 12-mile mark to cheer on the other team members. During my > 5 years here, I've been impressed by students' talents (e.g. in the Follies), bravery (in Fight Night), and intelligence (case presentations in my class) but when I saw my team-mates running with both fortitude and joy even after 12 miles, I felt a tremendous sense of pride. I saw Borja, Eoin, and Max en route to smashing the 2-hour mark. I jumped in with Nicole for her final mile. Due to an impossible calendar she'd only managed 10k in training, but conquered over double the distance that day. During that last mile she had a second wind, overtaking literally hundreds of runners and not being passed by a single person. She burst through the finish line in elation, and told me that it "was perhaps the happiest day since I moved to Philadelphia. I was happy because I achieved what seemed almost impossible, but more importantly, there were so many people on the street cheering for all the runners, and I really felt like I belong to this city and country. I was also really touched when I saw my dear learning team friends. It was such a freezing early Sunday morning, but they still came out to cheer for me! Learning team J8, you guys are the best!"

I made my way to mile 25 and saw Amy looking very strong, on her way to completing her first ever marathon in under 4 hours. Then I jumped in with Lane and ran the final mile with him. This was a tremendous honor: the next best thing to completing a marathon yourself is to run alongside a friend as he finishes his. He wrote:

"Health is a big part of why I run, but it's not just physical health—also mental, psychological, and spiritual. When I run, I have more energy and I can focus better on work. I chose this marathon because, with all of the challenges I'm facing as a first-year MBA student, I knew that discipline would be important. I thought that, if I could finish a marathon on top of everything else, then I could truly do anything, and that the experience would give me strength and confidence to face all of my other challenges. It was the ultimate stretch experience. And it was especially meaningful because I decided to devote the race to my mother, who lived in Philadelphia. I lost her last year, and she did not have the chance to see me move back to the US and enter Wharton, but I could not think of a better way to say "thank you" and "I love you" to her.

The last mile was unbelievable. I've never felt anything like that before in my life. It was simultaneously exhilarating, terrifying, energizing. The crowd, your encouraging words, the realization that I was about to finish a marathon, it all blurred together. I realized that complete strangers were calling my name, shouting, "You can do it!" I began to cry, then I began to hyperventilate and had to relax and control my breathing. Eventually I realized I had crossed the finish line. I couldn't believe it. I was in complete awe. Until that very moment, I still hadn't been sure whether I would be able to do it. I felt proud, accomplished, exhausted, but also sad that it was over so quickly. The past four hours had flown by. The pain finally hit me then, but it wasn't bad at all, and it was completely overshadowed by the warm feeling of accomplishment.

For me, the marathon was about proving that anything is possible. It's truly the case that we can do anything we put our minds to. Many people told me it was impossible - most of all, myself, when I looked at my schedule this fall, daunted, and had absolutely no idea how I was going to find the time to train. Then, to top it all off, I hurt my foot again this fall, and couldn't run for more than a month. But I persisted, and succeeded. Ultimately the race wasn't about anyone or anything else - not about showing off to classmates, not about physical fitness, not about school or Philadelphia or even my running mates. It was about me. It was the most intensely self-centered thing I have ever done, entirely about testing my own limits and proving to myself what I am capable of. I was running against myself. And I can't wait for my next marathon and the chance to do even better."

Dan Lavelle, the DetermiNation Event Manager, later wrote to me: "Wharton Against Cancer team has been one of my proudest moments with DetermiNation. For these students, who are so incredibly intelligent and immersed in their education, to take on an additional challenge of running...and not just running for its own sake...but for those impacted by cancer all over the world, is something very special to me."

While these athletes were running to fight cancer, Shash Mody (WG '13) had a different inspiration. When in Minnesota for a case competition, he met a teacher of 43 Somalian refugee and first generation first-grade students. He learned that the school, Banaadir Academy, had intermittent running water, no textbooks, and a scarcity of simple supplies such as pencils, crayons, scissors and glue. Shocked to see a U.S. charter school have no better conditions than in Somalia, Shash set out to raise \$28 for each student – and his friends and classmates went above and beyond, raising over \$1,500 so that first-grade kids could have basic supplies to get an education. He hopes that this "shows how easy it is to make a difference, and that others too will act upon initiatives they feel strongly about."

The movie *Spiderman* taught us that "with great power comes great responsibility." Wharton students have the talent, resources, and network to achieve great things that help themselves, or to achieve great things that help others – and achieve fulfillment for themselves as a by-product. These students – and those who supported them through sponsorship, through coming out to cheer for them on a cold Sunday morning, or through simple appreciation and encouragement – are a credit to our brand and a credit to the Wharton community.