Terry Fox: Canadian Cancer Research Activist Whose “Marathon of Hope” Inspired Millions

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Terry Stanley “Terry” Fox (1958-1981) was a Canadian athlete and cancer research activist whose attempt to run from coast to coast across Canada in 1980 inspired millions and left an enduring legacy. Fox was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1958 and moved with his family to Port Coquitlam, British Columbia (25 km from Vancouver), in 1968. His parents and siblings noted that Terry was extremely competitive and stubborn from an early age. Despite his small size, he was named “athlete of the year” by his graduating high school class, and he enrolled in Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1976, where he studied kinesiology, played junior varsity basketball, and planned to become a physical education teacher.

Chronic leg pain after an automobile accident in November 1976 eventually led to the diagnosis of osteosarcoma involving Fox’s right leg in March 1977. He underwent an above-the-knee amputation, followed by more than a year of adjuvant chemotherapy at the BC Cancer Agency. Reportedly, one of Fox’s physicians told him that if he had been diagnosed a few years earlier, he would have received less effective chemotherapy with a poorer chance of long-term survival, which made Fox acutely aware of the importance of cancer research. He was upset when he learned of the limited cancer research funding in Canada at the time of his diagnosis and became motivated to act after witnessing some of the difficult experiences of his fellow patients with cancer.

Fox recovered remarkably quickly after his amputation and began to walk with a prosthesis less than a month after his surgery. He refused to consider himself disabled and joined a wheelchair basketball team a few months later, ultimately winning a national championship. After reading about Dick Traum, an amputee who completed the New York City Marathon in 1976, Fox decided to run the entire East-West length of Canada to raise money in support of cancer research. He trained relentlessly over 15 months, logging more than 3,000 running miles despite numerous injuries to his stump as well as his healthy leg, and he completed his first marathon (in British Columbia) in August 1979. He finished dead last but was loudly cheered by moved spectators. A letter-writing campaign resulted in early publicity for his transnational marathon plans, including donation of a support van by Ford and running shoes by Adidas, as well as the encouragement of the initially skeptical Canadian Cancer Society.

Fox’s “Marathon of Hope” began when he dipped his artificial leg in the Atlantic Ocean near St. John’s, Newfoundland, on April 12, 1980, and was intended to finish at the Pacific Ocean in Victoria, British Columbia, sometime in 1981. Initially, crowds along Fox’s route were sparse and running was lonely. But, as time passed, interest escalated across the country. National media began extensive coverage of his quest, and his route was lined by well-wishers, donors, and fellow runners. Canadians of all ages followed his progress on television and were transfixed by his off-kilter stride and seemingly endless endurance. Fox never took a day off despite difficult weather, numerous injuries, careless drivers, and frequent arguments with his support team, which included his brother.

In late August 1980, Fox began to develop chest pain, cough, and shortness of breath, which resulted in hospitalization just outside of Thunder Bay in Western Ontario. He was found to have developed metastatic osteosarcoma in his lungs. By the time he had to abandon his marathon efforts, on September 1st—after running 143 consecutive days and covering more than 5,000 kilometers—he had raised $1.7 million for cancer research, and his story was known to millions of people in Canada and around the world.

Fox received numerous systemic treatments after his cancer recurred, including experimental interferon, but his disease...
progressed. Despite his weakened condition, he granted many interviews and continued to make appeals for cancer research funding until just before his death. On February 1, 1981, four months before his death, Fox achieved his original goal of raising $1 for every Canadian citizen; his Marathon of Hope Fund at the time totaled $24.17 million.

In September 1980, he became the youngest person ever to be named a Companion of the Order of Canada. The major research unit of the BC Cancer Agency in Vancouver received funds raised by the Marathon of Hope and was designated the “Terry Fox Laboratory” in 1981. After Fox died in June 1981, numerous roads, schools, athletic centers, parks, and fitness trails across Canada were named in his honor. A previously unnamed mountain in the Selkirk Range in British Columbia was christened Mount Terry Fox, and his story was dramatized in a film and in several books.

Since 1981, the Terry Fox Foundation has raised over $600 million for cancer research, and Fox has become an iconic figure for both disease advocates and disabled persons. The Terry Fox National School Run Day continues to involve thousands of schools and millions of students and teachers in Canada and across the world. In November 2004, Terry Fox was voted the second “Greatest Canadian of All Time” in a national poll organized by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Terry Fox has been honored twice philately by Canada. In 1982 (Scott #915), Fox became the first person ever to be depicted on a Canadian postage stamp without having been deceased for at least 10 years. He was included in Canada’s Millenium Series of postage stamps in January 2000 (Scott #1824) and was also the first individual Canadian depicted on a general circulation coin, a 2005 commemorative dollar.