



Former Rusk patient Yuki Goto after finishing the New York City marathon, flanked by the two volunteer aides who ran with him during the race.

## Team Rusk Goes the Distance

IT WAS 1:00 P.M. ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, and Bonnie Marks, PsyD, waited just past the finish line of the 2009 New York City Marathon, scanning the sea of exhausted faces. “Do you see Yuki?” the NYU Langone Medical Center psychologist asked. “He should be here any minute.”

The 26-mile race was several hours old, and runners were streaming into Central Park by the thousands. At last, Dr. Marks spied the person she was seeking. Supported on either side by two guides who ran with him every step of the way, 23-year-old Yuki Goto was barely standing. Through his fatigue, however, a glint of satisfaction shone. His goal had been to break 3 hours and 40 minutes, and his companion’s wristwatch showed his time: 3:39.

“Find a medic!” Dr. Marks ordered. Yuki was hustled onto a golf cart, where

he gulped down a half-gallon of water and Gatorade. By the time he got to the medical tent, a few hundred yards away, he was starting to recover.

“Do you speak English?” a healthcare worker asked. “Yes,” he replied. “And I speak Japanese, too!”

“Yuki’s feeling better,” Dr. Marks reassured the young man’s mother over her cell phone. “He’s making jokes.”

Dr. Marks’s concern was both personal and professional: she is a Psychology Fellow with the Brain Injury Day Treatment Program at the Medical Center’s

Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine, where Yuki was a patient until very recently. Following a near-fatal car accident several years ago that left him in a coma for two weeks, part of his brain had to be surgically removed. “It left me completely bent over,” Yuki recalls. “I had to learn to walk again.” After doing physical therapy at another venue, he spent two-and-a-half years in the Rusk Institute program working to overcome the cognitive and psychological deficits caused by his traumatic brain injury, or TBI.

The 2009 New York City Marathon, Yuki’s third, also marked the debut of Team Rusk, a group of Rusk Institute patients who competed as a group in this year’s race. Three team members—Yuki, Allan Tyson, and Samuel Brandenburg—are alumni of the brain injury program. The other six are graduates of Rusk’s physical therapy program. Three of them, Adhiambo Mitchell, a bilateral amputee, and Eduardo Hernandez and Joe Forrester, both paraplegics, were covering the five-borough

route in arm-operated bikes known as hand-crankers. Two others, Iris Jimenez, a polio survivor, and Clara Bailon, whose spinal cord was injured when a car struck her in a crosswalk, were competing in wheelchairs. The sixth, Derek Srisaranard, recovering from the physical effects of a brain injury, was walking the course.

The idea for an official Rusk Institute road-racing team was hatched in March 2009 by physical therapist Angela Stolfi. “I thought it would make a great entry point into the community for our patients,” she says. Under the auspices of Achilles International—a New York-based organization run by and for disabled athletes—Stolfi began holding weekly practices along the East River, assisted by other Rusk volunteers. The sessions, open to anyone who wanted to attend, drew a number of current and former Rusk patients.



Recovering post-race, Yuki is all smiles.

“The training is individualized,” says Stolfi. “One volunteer walked alongside Derek, encouraging him to go faster and longer. Others ran with the hand-crank cyclists—until they got too fast to keep up with!” For Iris and Clara, who practiced in motorized chairs, the sessions helped them acclimatize to being outdoors for extended periods. In the race itself, the wheelchair competitors would be accompanied by Rusk staffers while each of the TBI patients would have a pair of Achilles volunteers running with them.

To Stolfi, Team Rusk is a natural outgrowth of Rusk Institute’s approach to physical therapy. “At Rusk, the goal is to help each patient maximize his or her potential and engage fully in life,” she notes. “Our marathon group exemplifies that. It’s very diverse, with everyone working at their own level to meet the challenge of participating in this major citywide event.”



Team Rusk members celebrate their successful marathons (clockwise from upper left): Allan Tyson with his two race aides; Clara Bailon gets a kiss from Dr. Bonnie Marks; Iris Jimenez surrounded by three aides; and hand-crank athlete Joe Forrester in the finish area.

The three TBI competitors were encouraged to join Team Rusk by Dr. Marks, a runner herself. Marathon training, she explains, with the focus, discipline, and planning it entails, offers a chance to apply the compensatory strategies taught in the holistic Rusk program, which was established in the early 1980s by Yehuda Ben-Yishay, PhD, professor of rehabilitation medicine. “Our trainees learn to enhance attention and concentration, information processing, memory, and higher-level reasoning,” she says. Patients enroll for 20-week cycles, returning for additional cycles if necessary. Since recovery is a lifelong process, their families are included, as well. Many trainees stay in touch with Rusk staff even after their rehabilitation is completed, updating them on major life changes such as marriage or birth of children.

Dr. Marks kept close tabs on her TBI group’s training. “We’re like a family,” she says. Yuki, now living in Japan, communicated via e-mail, while Allan, a first-time marathoner, and Sam, with one marathon already under his belt, frequently practiced together, following a regimen that included long runs of up to 18 miles. Trainees from the brain-injury program have been participating in the New York Marathon as part of the Achilles marathon team since 2006, and a total of five trainees have completed the race.

Race day brought the proverbial meeting of preparation and opportunity. The weather, sunny and cool, was ideal, and Team Rusk responded in kind. Volunteers at the finish line got regular updates on team members’ progress from others along the marathon route, and it was clear that everyone was performing well. Despite a few glitches—some bike chain problems for a hand-crank competitor, a drained battery in a power wheelchair that needed replacing—all the Rusk participants came in close to their predicted finish times (*see list*). With 10 finishers out of 10 starters, Team Rusk and their volunteer aides were uniformly tired but exhilarated. “It was a special experience,” said Dr. Marks.

“The marathon is like rehab,” Yuki had explained a few nights before the competition. “Sometimes you feel like stopping—but you have to keep going.” There was a favorite quote at Rusk, he added, that said it all: “Mile by mile, it’s hard to smile. Yard by yard, my god, it’s hard. Inch by inch, it’s a cinch.” ●

—ROYCE FLIPPIN

## Team Rusk 2009 NYC Marathon Results

- 5:27:12 • Clara Bailon (wheelchair)
- 5:50:40 • Samuel Brandenburg (runner)
- 3:30:00 • Joe Forrester (hand-crank bicycle)
- 3:39:48 • Yuki Goto (runner)
- 3:30:43 • Eduardo Hernandez (hand-crank bicycle)
- 5:15:38 • Iris Jimenez (wheelchair)
- 2:30:55 • Adhiambo Mitchell (hand-crank bicycle)
- 8:03:21 • Derek Srisaranard (walker)
- 4:52:36 • Allan Tyson (runner)