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GRAHAM CORNES

MALCOLM Blight famously once said that a football season was like a marathon. The wisdom of his words was confirmed when the Crows recovered from a disastrous start in 1997 to win the flag.

I have loved the metaphor ever since. In fact, I've often used it for life itself.

But running a marathon? I've watched these long-distance runners closely. They never look healthy, they rarely smile and the gauntness in their faces and eyes ages them prematurely. Sure the heart, lungs and cardiovascular system may be in fantastic shape, but what good is that when you look like riff-raff? Would I run a marathon? Never. Besides, the old footy injuries – the ankle, knees, back and hips – just wouldn't allow it.

However, it's hard to say no to Chris McDermott when he makes the case for his Little Heroes charity. Would Stephen Rowe and I go with a group to New York and run the New York Marathon to raise money for the kids and their families? Rowey, who had already run in the event three times, and thinks he is

an honorary New Yorker, had said yes for both of us before I had barely considered it.

Last Sunday we found ourselves on Staten Island with 44,827 other freezing souls and a course of 42km snaking through the five boroughs of New York in front of us. I had no expectations other than to finish. If it took six hours or longer, (the race record is 2:07:43), so be it. Besides, expectations for events such as these can kill you. Former Crows club champion Matthew Liptak ran the race last year with high expectations.

When he didn't beat his old Glenelg teammate, Nick Chigwidden, home, and was about 15 minutes out of his predicted time, his trip was spoiled. Of course the boys won't let him forget it.

Training is the hard part. I started slowly, often walking then breaking into a slow jog, and coming home a couple of hours later.

It is amazing how quickly you can get into the routine of running, and indeed, how far you can run when you build up to it slowly. I'd never

run 20km before, let alone 25 or 30. Three or four times a week over a period of three or four months was about all it took. Then the fantasies start to take over. Maybe I can break four hours – this, despite training times indicating it would be closer to five hours if I finished.

The best part was the start when you run over the Verrazano Bridge with the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan Island in the distance. From there it got tougher and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't excruciating by the end. The route is lined with passionate New Yorkers who cheer and yell encouragement. But, that doesn't help you at the 25km mark when the muscles in the legs start to seize up, and the calves start to cramp. It's pretty demoralising when the call comes from behind: "move over, blind runner coming through". Previously, I'd been passed by a man with one leg. At least I passed the guy in the rhinoceros outfit.

Before we left Australia, I received letters from the par-

ents of two of the kids who had benefited from the Little Heroes Foundation, Claire Brooker and Adam McAllister. Claire, six, had been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia when she was 5, and Adam had battled cancer and acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, on and off since he was 16 months old. (He's now 10).

Courageous kids, whose families speak highly of the support they've had from the Foundation. Claire sent me a photo and a sign saying "Keep running, Graham", and the determination of Adam, who needs a bone marrow transplant, was inspirational.

How can we complain about anything when we see what these kids and their families are going through? "When you get to the 36km mark, Graham, just remember that you can do anything, you just have to believe in yourself and never, ever give up just like Claire (and Adam)," wrote Claire's mum.

It brought tears to my eyes, and ensured pulling out of that marathon was never an option. My time? Five hours, two minutes and 34 seconds, in 35,112th position.



GRUELLING: Months of hard work makes crossing the finish line of the New York Marathon worth it. Picture: GETTY IMAGES