

A life-saving break: Presque Isle marathoner's heart stops while running amid ER nurses

David Bruce, Erie Times-News
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Greg Woodman's last thought before collapsing from cardiac arrest was to get off the road and closer to the sand at Presque Isle State Park.

Woodman, a 65-year-old State College resident, was running the [Presque Isle Half Marathon](#) July 16 with two of his sons, Joe and Nate. They raced together for a couple of miles, then he told them to go ahead at their normal pace.



Greg Woodman, right, poses with son Joe, after they ran in the Las Vegas Half Marathon on April 1. Greg Woodman, a 65-year-old State College resident, has recovered from cardiac arrest he suffered while running the Presque Isle Half Marathon on July 16.

The next time he saw them was in the UPMC Hamot emergency department.

“The last thing I remember was talking with a guy running with a stroller next to me near the four-mile mark,” Woodman said. “It was getting warm and I felt maybe I was running too fast. [That’s when I thought about heading over to the sand.](#) Maybe at some level I knew I was going to collapse.”



Greg, #1297, moments before cardiac arrest.

Moments later, Woodman’s heart went into an abnormal rhythm that prevents it from pumping blood to the brain and other organs. He slumped to the ground, falling hard enough for his glasses to gash his forehead.

A person in cardiac arrest will die within a few minutes if the heart is not shocked back into a normal rhythm, and just 10% of people who suffer cardiac arrest outside of a hospital survive, according to the National Institutes of Health.

But Woodman caught a life-saving break. He didn’t know it at the time, but several nurses who were trained in advanced life support were running near Woodman when he collapsed.

“I was a little behind him, and when I looked up I saw a couple of people doing CPR and others waving their arms, yelling for medical personnel,” said Laura Overly, R.N., a critical care nurse at Armstrong County Memorial Hospital. “I took off my headphones and told them I was an ER nurse. I started doing CPR and doing pulse checks on him.”

Tabitha Bowser, R.N., a former ER nurse who works with Overly at the Kittanning hospital, was running about a minute behind her.

“I could tell that something serious was going on up the road,” Bowser said. “As I got closer, I could see Laura was doing chest compressions on someone.”

Performing CPR can be exhausting, especially for people who have just run 3.8 miles, so Bowser and a male nurse relieved Overly and took turns doing chest compressions.

“*Had I been running by myself in the woods when this happened, I wouldn’t be here now. I want to come back to Erie for the full marathon in September and shake everyone’s hand.*”

GREG WOODMAN, ON COLLAPSING FROM CARDIAC ARREST WHILE RUNNING IN THE PRESQUE ISLE HALF MARATHON

They weren’t alone; about a dozen runners and bystanders gathered around Woodman. Some performed CPR, others called 911, sought out park officials or tried to make Woodman comfortable.

“I’d say six, eight maybe even 10 of us took turns doing chest compressions,” said Mikaela Hess, R.N., a Hamot ER nurse who arrived just moments after Woodman collapsed. “It felt like a lifetime, though it was just five minutes or so before the ambulance arrived.”

Some of the nurses helped paramedics attach the pads of an automated external defibrillator to Woodman's chest so his heart could be shocked back into rhythm. He was also given a shot of epinephrine and a breathing bag was used to improve his respiration.

A single shock restored Woodman's normal heart rhythm, Overly said, though he remained unconscious as he was placed into the ambulance and taken to Hamot.

The rescuers slowly dispersed, with many of them resuming their run around the peninsula without knowing whether Woodman would survive.

"I was a little tired but I also had a dose of adrenaline," Overly said. "I thought about (Greg) for a lot of the race. He wasn't able to finish it, so maybe I was running for him a little bit."

Woodman was confused and argumentative in the ambulance

Woodman regained consciousness during the ambulance trip to Hamot. Like other cardiac arrest survivors, he was a little confused and argumentative.

"Apparently he was arguing with the paramedics that he needed to get back running," Joe Woodman said. "They needed to give him a sedative."

Joe Woodman was notified about his father about halfway through the race. He called his mother, then got a ride to the finish line, where he waited for his brother, Nate Woodman.

They then drove to Hamot and met their father in the Hamot ER.

"I might have run a few red lights," Joe Woodman said.

What caused the cardiac arrest?

Diagnostic tests performed at Hamot revealed two blockages in his circumflex artery, which supplies blood to the outer side and back of the heart. They likely triggered a heart attack that caused Woodman's cardiac arrest.

It's unusual for someone in good enough shape to run marathons to suffer cardiac arrest, said Dr. Jean Moubarak, a Hamot cardiologist who treated Woodman.

"It's a surprise, but we have seen it before," Moubarak said. "That's when we look at cholesterol levels, family history, things like that."

Woodman had two stents placed in the artery to restore blood flow. He felt well enough to be released from Hamot July 19 and head back to State College.

He must undergo cardiac rehabilitation and additional testing, but Moubarak said Woodman should be able to resume running marathons if he wants.

An extraordinary recovery for Woodman

Woodman's recovery is extraordinary. Not only did he survive, but Woodman didn't suffer permanent damage to his heart or brain, Moubarak said.

"He was lucky that he had people around him that knew advanced life support and they started it immediately," Moubarak said. "Doing CPR is enough to maintain blood flow to the brain until a normal heart rhythm can be restored."

Amazingly, this isn't the first time Bowser has saved the life of a cardiac arrest victim outside of a hospital.

"I was 16 and I had just taken a CPR class," Bowser said. "I was working at a grocery store in my hometown and an older gentleman in line went into cardiac arrest. He also survived."

As he recovers, Woodman has been emailing with some of the people who helped save his life. He also wrote a letter detailing his experience and expressing his gratitude.

It's titled, "Why Erie has my heart."

Why Erie has my heart

I left the Presque Isle Half with a little piece of Erie in my heart. Or, technically, two pieces thanks to the skilled Doctors at UPMC (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center) Erie.

I had already had a rough week. On July 10, I lost my 92-year-old dad. To give you an idea of how much he meant to me without requiring a full section of the paper, I will just say this: I asked him to be my best man in my wedding. After services for him on Friday, July 14 in Maryland, I debated whether I would head to Erie for the half marathon on Sunday. I was emotionally and physically tired, but running is a passion and an outlet for me. Two of my three sons were also registered to run, and we decided to follow through. Running the past years with my adult children has become sentimental fun with a purpose experience. I had my eye on qualifying for Boston and this ½ was to train for the Erie Marathon that I had entered for September as the last chance to qualify for Boston 2024. By virtue of turning 65 in June, the 4-hour 5-minute Boston qualifying time seemed teasingly doable as I am not really a real runner, but more a consistent 10 mile a week person that with the BQ goal has been increasing since January to qualify with my boys for Boston.

The course for the race is beautiful, highlighting Erie's greatest natural asset. I knew going in having been helping my dad the prior two weeks that I had not run nor slept well that this was going to be a tough run. I would be living off the prior two ½ marathons in the past 8 months (Philly and Las Vegas). My last memory is around mile 3.5. I started thinking I better get over to the side near the sand as I was feeling funky. Lucky for me, I collapsed in the right place at the right time—near many nurses and EMT professionals running near me who saw me go down. The heroes I am learning their names and connecting with them appear to be 11 amazing people who gave me CPR until the EMS crew arrived with an AED machine and epinephrine. In no uncertain terms, Mikaela, Laura, Tabitha, Leo, Kyle, Torrie, Aaron, Darren, Brian plus other runners and the emergency medical team onsite saved my life.

At UPMC Erie, I received exceptional care and treatment. Another stroke of luck, the hospital is home to the Hamot Heart & Vascular Institute. With two stents in place, I was able to make my way home to State College, PA, on Wednesday after just 3 days post cardiac arrest.

I am told that for 6 minutes, I had no heartbeat other than the beat from the hands of heroic runners. My cardiologist made it clear that had this incident happened somewhere else, I would not be sharing this letter with you today. There is a lot that I would have missed. Our oldest and middle sons are both getting married in 2024. My youngest son Nathan who did finish with a 1:30 in the half needs 3 hours flat for the full marathon to qualify for Boston. I am hoping he does go up to run the full Erie Marathon on September 9th. One, so he qualifies and two, for me to personally shake the hands of the amazing people in Erie who were there to save me. My middle son Joe lives in Scottsdale Arizona and flew home for my dad's funeral and decided to enter the race. He was notified in mile 9 by my wife Anita who as emergency contact was notified by race officials that it was me in the ambulance and he ran to the next water station where another amazing volunteer drove him to the finish where he grabbed Nate and got to the hospital. Side note, my oldest son is a Doctor at UPMC in Pittsburgh and he drove up that night.

But because I was in Erie—on Presque Isle, next to amazingly trained CPR nurses, minutes away from the Hamot Heart Center—I am here in State College with my wife Anita today. So, I am writing to say thank you... to offer my deepest and most sincere gratitude to the people and the place that saved my life. Erie, you are in my heart—literally and figuratively—forever.

“Had I been running by myself in the woods when this happened, I wouldn't be here now,” Woodman said. “I want to come back to Erie for the full marathon in September and shake everyone's hand.” ■