

Calvert County Times

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#1 in USA, 13th in the World

IN LOCAL

La Plata Man Charged with
Theft from Veterans Charity

IN COMMUNITY

MLK Days

IN LOCAL

Watermen Enjoy Good
Oyster Season So Far

Photo Courtesy of Donald Balcom

#1 in USA, 13th in the World

By Crista Dockray
Staff Writer

Donald Balcom wakes up everyday at 1:30 a.m. to run. He runs almost everyday, sometimes up to 24 miles in under three hours.

Balcom is visually impaired. He has five degrees of vision in each eye and has been diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, which causes the constriction of peripheral vision.

Despite his disability, Balcom has been ranked the number one visually impaired runner of his T12 classification (given by International Paralympic Committee) in the USA and 13th in his classification in the world.

He has only been running since 2012, just a short 3.5 years.

Balcom grew up in upstate New York in the Finger Lakes region. He was the middle of five brothers, attended a small school, and was a lover of sports. He even traveled to England and Wales for a soccer tournament.

Although he was a loved sports, he said he never liked running and never understood why people did it.

After graduating high school with a class of around 60 people, he attended Clarkson University for Mechanical Engineering, still active on teams.

During his sophomore year, with persuasion of a flyer in the mail, he decided to join the Navy. He applied to be a part of their exceptional student program to become a nuclear propulsion officer, and was accepted even though the program was only for juniors and seniors.

He enlisted, was put on active duty, and finished college with just below a 4.0 GPA. After graduating, he reported to officer candidate school, but just three days later received bad news.

After some testing, he was told he had 10 to 12 degrees of vision and was given his diagnosis.

For the next 10 years or so, Retinitis Pigmentosa did not slow him down. He still drove, coached

and refereed soccer, played sports, and worked. He also received his master's degree in Engineering Management.

In 2005, however, New York State revoked his license and his life became more challenging.

During this time he stopped playing sports and moved around to a few jobs.

In 2009, he moved to Southern Maryland and started working in target engineering for NAVAIR. His job allows him to develop targets and target systems for test and evaluation at his office located in the Solomons Island Navy Recreation Area.

Because he was working, a self-proclaimed lover of food, and not as active in sports, he gained a bit of weight and at his heaviest weighed 215 pounds.

One day, two years after his move, Balcom was watching TV and overheard something about the Ironman Triathlon.

He knew he wanted to make a lifestyle change and that day made the choice to train for his first triathlon.

He began his training on the treadmill and searching for triathlons in the area. While searching, he stumbled upon the Paralympic Sport Club of Southern Maryland, which had just formed and was the second Paralympic Sport Club in Maryland.

When he gave them a call, they offered him a place on their board where he still stands to this day.

Not long after in 2012, Balcom made contact with Disabled Sports USA who asked if he would like to run a race. They had a team of veterans that were going to run the Hood to Coast Relay Race in Oregon and he would be one of the 12 team members.

Although he had never run a race before, he agreed.

Hood to Coast Relay is a 200-mile race with 36 legs, each team member taking three legs. According to Balcom, he had no idea that this was one of the largest relay races in the world and that he would be competing with about 13,000 other people.

Nerves kicked in. He, who had trained himself and never ran a race before, did not want to let anybody down.

And he did not. On his three legs he finished 52nd,

Paralympic Experience:

- 2013 Paralympic T&F National Championships 1500m – Gold (T12)

Career Highlights:

- Track:
- 2013 Paralympic T&F Marathon World Ranking – 9th (T12)
 - 2013 Paralympic T&F Marathon Americas Ranking – 2nd (T12)
 - 2013 Lower Potomac River Marathon – 7th
 - 2013 Desert Challenge Games 1,500m – 1st (T12)
 - 2013 Desert Challenge Games 5,000m – 1st (T12)
 - 2013 Paralympic T&F National Championships 1,500m – Gold (T12)
 - 2013 Marine Corps Marathon – 196th
 - 2015 Walt Disney World Half Marathon – 60th
 - 2015 Boston Marathon – 1670th
 - 2015 Boston Marathon Blind/Visually-Impaired Division Champion
 - 3 time Boston Marathon Qualifier (2014-2016)
- Rowing:
- 2014 Mid-Atlantic ERG Sprints – 1st (Adaptive Men PD - LTA)
 - 2015 Mid-Atlantic ERG Sprints – 2nd (Adaptive Men PD - LTA)

Personal Records:

Track:	1,500m	5:01.26	19-MAY-2013
	5,000m	17:58	08-DEC-2012
	5 mile	32:26	16-SEP-2012
	10,000m	38:30	18-OCT-2014
	10 mile	1:05:15	12-OCT-2014
	Half Marathon	1:24:23	10-JAN-2015
	Marathon	2:55:45	20-APR-2015
Rowing:	1,000m	3:23.3	01-MAR-2015
	20 min	1:56.1/500m	30-DEC-2013



Photos Courtesy of Donald Balcom

46th, and 32nd out of around 1,100 people. In his age group he finished 3rd, 5th, and 5th.

He was 38 and had only been running for five weeks.

He found that he had a skill for running and he enjoyed it, so when he returned home he began to run local races, consistently finishing in the top five to top ten.

Just in Calvert, he ran the 2012 CAASA 5K, the 2012 Jingle Bell 5K, the 2013 SMCN Resolution Run 5K, the 2013 Race to the Creek 5K, and the 2014 SMCN Resolution Run 5K.

In March of 2013, he ran his first marathon, the Lower Potomac River Marathon, which he trained for himself, ran unguided, and qualified for the Boston Marathon. A week later he ran the Bataan Memorial Death March in New Mexico, where he finished ninth out of 5,800 people.

This race Balcom ran with a guide and has done so ever since. In the beginning Balcom ran unguided. He would ask for maps and follow behind other runners to keep track of where he was going.

It was stressful he said, so he hired a guide. Balcom allows his guide to be his eyes by keeping a hand their shoulder and focusing just on the run itself. Sometimes one person acts as his guide, sometimes it is many.

"It's getting increasingly difficult," said Balcom about finding runners that are close to his level.

Especially since in 2013, he ran the Marine Corps Marathon, finishing 196th and accomplishing his first sub three-hour marathon.

He went on to do better. In 2015, he completed his first Boston Marathon after an injury left him unable to do so the year before. He placed 1670th overall running a 2:55:45, and until he returned home, unknowingly won the 2015 Boston Marathon Blind/Visually-Impaired Division.

"That was probably my favorite race," Balcom said.

Shortly after in October, he competed in the Chicago Marathon running his personal best of 2:50:38 and eight weeks later went to compete in the California International Marathon, also the USBA Blind Athletes National Championships. Unfortunately, at mile five, he tangled feet with his guide and landed hard. Halfway

through the marathon he was forced to pull out due to an injury to his hip.

That same month he became a board member of Southern Maryland Community Resources and this past weekend he finished the Disney Half Marathon.

What's next is something amazing. Balcom has been selected by the International Paralympic Committee to represent TEAM USA at the London Marathon in April. He hopes in London to do a 2:43 or 2:45 and qualify for the Paralympics in Rio.

"I am just waiting to put on that USA uniform and run that race," said Balcom.

At this time Balcom is trying to find guides. He needs a runner that can do 2:40 or below, a U.S. Citizen and of someone of equal gender because of roles. London will be paying for the accommodations, but airfare and extra costs will be his, so Balcom is hoping to raise money through the community to help him accomplish his goal and pay the way for his guides.

If you would like to donate, visit www.usaba.myetap.org/fundraiser/athletedevelopmentaccounts/donate.do?sponsor=849.0428502043.

When Balcom is not running or working, he's at home with his wife Andrea of 12 years, his son Austin, 9, and his daughter Alaina, 4. He likes to row as a good way of cross-training, he likes woodworking, doing things around the house, but mostly he likes to relax when he can.

In the future he hopes to set the American record for the visually impaired by breaking 2:43, go to the Paralympic Games in Rio, go back and win the USBA Blind Athletes National Championships, get his Ph.D., run the New York Marathon, and do the Boston Marathon once more.

"I don't think I would change that I am visually impaired. If they had a cure, I don't think I would change it because I'm doing some pretty cool stuff. I've done things the past three years that I never thought I would do and I'll probably do stuff in the next few years that I don't think I can do right now," said Balcom.

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Donald Balcom

