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Paralympian João Corrêa and the Ultramarathon Challenge **by Marcos Netto**

Four years ago, on a brutally hot summer Sunday morning, I had just started out on my daily bicycle ride when I saw someone in the road ahead of me. But the person I saw wasn't riding a bike. He was in a racing wheelchair. He was moving fast, too. It took me quite a while to catch up to him, and when I did, I couldn't contain my curiosity. "Where are you going, my friend?" I asked.

"Home," he replied. "I rode from Esteio, Rio Grande do Sul, to the university, and then I continued on to here."

I was astonished. "But that is about 33 kilometers [20 miles]," I blurted out.

"No," he said, glancing at a computer on his wheelchair. "It's 42 kilometers [26 miles]!"

We rode along together for a few kilometers, sharing a bottle of cold water, while my companion told me how he happened to be racing down the highway in a wheelchair on a hot Sunday morning.

"My name is João Corrêa," he began. "I am a professional Paralympic athlete. I have been racing marathons and half-marathons, in Brazil and in many other countries, for the past 20 years. Now I have an invitation to participate in the New York Marathon, but my sponsor, a local university, has just filed for bankruptcy and left me a sponsorless 'orphan.' The mayor's office has promised to help, but nothing has yet materialized. So here I am, doing what I can to keep in shape while I look for a new sponsor."

Needless to say, João's story couldn't help but move me. After all, how many of us would have the courage to keep going after such a bitter disappointment? Then and there, I promised myself that if I could assist João, I would do so. And I gave him my word I would try to raise the cash he needed to compete.

A few months later, my company, [Itati Água Mineral](#), began assisting João with hydration products and wheelchair maintenance, and within a year we had signed a contract with him. We would sponsor João during training and competition. In exchange, he agreed to promote the Itati brand.



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João Corrêa and his racing wheelchair

In fulfilling his side of the bargain, João gives occasional talks about the challenges confronting a professional Paralympian. During one of these, he was asked how many kilometers he typically rode while training for a marathon. (A full marathon is 42.195 kilometers, or 26.21 miles.) His reply? “One thousand kilometers [621 miles]. And I have raced more than 70 full marathons in all, plus another 230 half-marathons.”

You do the math.

When asked about his longest single ride, João answered, “Fifty kilometers [31 miles].”

At the end of his talk, the conversation turned to bicycle racing, and I asked João if he had ever considered competing in a handcycle. He said he had, but he’d found that handcycles were very costly, and he’d never been able to afford one.

To which I replied, “Well, then, let’s work out a way to get you a handcycle!”

João was understandably excited at this prospect. But we agreed that getting him on the seat of the ‘cycle was really only the start. What should the next step be? And that’s when we hit on the idea of the Two Hundred Kilometer (125-mile) Ultramarathon Challenge. Could João complete a 200-kilometer course in less than 12 hours? That was the question.

At first, he hesitated. A handcycle is very different from a racing wheelchair, and 200 kilometers is a long distance for any cyclist to ride in 12 hours or less. But João isn’t a man to shrink from a challenge. “I can do it!” he declared. “Just get me on the seat, and I’ll go the distance.”

That’s when things really got interesting.

First I had to convince my partners at Itati that the Two Hundred Kilometer Ultramarathon Challenge was a good idea. We all agreed that we should do everything we could to promote the Paralympic ideal, but did the Ultramarathon Challenge also make good *business* sense? I thought it did, and in the end, I talked my partners around to my way of thinking. But we also needed to get other companies on side. Soon [Stem Pharmaceutical](#), a company producing high-energy foods and energy drinks for athletes, had joined the team. Then the local Rotary Club, [Rotary Clube de Canoas Industrial](#), adopted João’s Challenge as a model to encourage other companies to undertake similar projects. As the name suggests, Rotary International is a global organization, and it has received widespread recognition for its humanitarian service and high ethical standards.

Rotary International is also engaged in a long-term project to eradicate polio, [PolioPlus](#). This mission resonates with João, who [lost the use of his legs](#) while still a young man, when the scaffolding he was working on collapsed and he fell four stories, suffering massive spinal injuries. Hospitalized for 18 months, and facing a lifetime in a wheelchair, he saw competitive sport as the best way to rebuild and maintain his fitness, while making the most of his natural abilities.



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From left to right, Guilerhme Nunnenkamp and Alexandre Abrantes from Stem Pharmaceuticals, with Marcos Netto and João Corrêa

As sponsors joined the Ultramarathon Challenge team, the pace quickened. The project was officially launched on October 10, 2012, when Rotary officials met with representatives of the sponsoring companies and the press. On October 24, João started training with the handcycle. To assist him in meeting his Challenge goals, we assembled a group of professionals and volunteers. Ten fellow cyclists were invited to participate in the project. Acting as João's on-the-road support team, these cyclists—all of them expert long-distance riders—are his “guardian angels,” forming a protective phalanx around João as he cranks out the kilometers on our busy highways. Every member of the team wears a high-visibility jersey designed especially for the Ultramarathon Challenge.





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João Corrêa and His Guardian Angels

João's support team also includes a physician, a nutritionist, a physical education teacher, a bike mechanic, and even a public relations specialist. All are volunteers, and each is committed to helping João realize his goal.

As for myself, I am proud of the role that I and Itati have played in getting the Ultramarathon project off the ground, a project that I think will both further the Paralympic ideal and generate goodwill for all the sponsors. Of course, as a cyclist, I can appreciate the magnitude of the personal challenge facing João. While training for the Ultramarathon, he will crank his handcycle some 8,000 kilometers (nearly 5,000 miles).

The payoff comes on the first weekend in April, 2013. João will leave Canoas, Rio Grande do Sul, at 10 p.m. and arrive in the state capital, Porto Alegre, the next morning, having ridden 200 kilometers in less than 12 hours. (Should bad weather force João to delay his departure, the ride will be rescheduled for the following weekend.)

What does João think about all this? It would only be natural for him to feel a bit apprehensive. After all, he has never raced a handcycle before, and he will be riding four times farther than his longest distance in a wheelchair. But his confidence grows with every kilometer he rides. And how does he answer those who suggest his goal is unreachable? "I do not know that it is impossible," he replies. "So I will do it!"



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João Corrêa and Marcos Netto

[Marcos Netto](#) is TN Outside's Southern Hemisphere Correspondent.

Stay Up to Date on João Corrêa and the Ultramarathon Challenge

- E-mail [Rotary Clube de Canoas Industrial](#) for more information about the Ultramarathon Challenge.
- Get training updates and photos at [Rotary Clube de Canoas Industrial](#)'s Facebook page.
- Follow the Challenge Tweets on Twitter: @rotarycanoasind
- Check out [João Corrêa's story on YouTube](#). It's in Portuguese, but a picture's worth a thousand words, right?

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