



Photo by Jim Weber

March 17, 2013 — Paul Appleby brightens up as he and runner Gene Carter start the Germantown Half Marathon in the middle of the pack Sunday morning. The pair have been partnering in races for nine years running nine half-marathons and 89 races in all. They have recently qualified for the Boston Marathon. (Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal)

## **Push-wheelchair team from Bartlett, Germantown prepares for Boston Marathon**

By [Lela Garlington](#) - Posted March 27, 2013 at 5:59 p.m

When you see a tall lanky runner with “26.2” tattooed above his left ankle and a baseball cap on his bald head, you might think that he is pushing a racing wheelchair with a smiling young man prodding him on.

“I don’t push him,” Gene Carter insists. “He pushes me.”

That’s what a friend, a motivator and a partner does. That’s what Paul Appleby, 25, who lives on the outskirts of Bartlett, is to Carter, 51, of Collierville.

On April 15, the duo will be among the 26,629 racers competing in the 117th Boston Marathon. They are one of only four push-wheelchair teams in which a runner is pushing someone in a wheelchair. The 26.2 inside an oval tattoo signifies the number of miles in a marathon.

Among the four runners, Carter is the only one who actually qualified to start in the 2013 general race by running the New Orleans Marathon in three hours and 22 minutes — eight minutes below the qualifying time. The other three runners gained entrance under the marathon’s athletes with disabilities program.

Just last week, Carter and Appleby learned that an Angel Flight that had agreed to take Appleby and his father, Bob Appleby to Boston, have canceled the flight. The plane’s engine is being overhauled and won’t be finished in time for the race. The nonprofit group helps people in need by flying them at no cost.

“We have to go somehow, some way,” said his mother, Phyllis Appleby. “We don’t give up easily. Resilience is a part of the game.”

Even though he is qualified to run in the general race, Carter has vowed to run with Paul Appleby. “I won’t race without him.”

Once word filtered out into the community about the canceled flight, a parent with a special-needs child donated his frequent flier miles so that Paul and Bob Appleby could fly. FedEx, where Carter works in Collierville, also is shipping Paul’s racing chair and other accessories to Boston for free.

Watch Carter and the younger Appleby in a race and you can see on their faces the bond they have. Run beside them and you can hear Appleby coaching along the way. “You OK Mr. Gene?” Appleby asks during the recent Germantown Half Marathon, then adds, “I love you but you are going too slow. Go faster Mr. Gene. People are passing us.”

When Carter and Appleby pass others, Appleby encourages them, “God bless you sir. God bless you ma’am.”

Appleby has cerebral palsy, a movement disorder that affects his arms and legs but not his brain. His hands often curl up. His speech is stilted. But when he’s racing with Mr. Gene, the younger Appleby said, “It’s awesome.”

For a moment, Carter added, “It feels like he’s not handicapped anymore.”

Now that the transportation details are finalized, both Carter and Appleby are excited about meeting their inspiration — a father and son team who first ran as the first push-wheelchair competitor in the Boston Marathon in 1981.

Nine years ago, a Raleigh Assembly of God minister played a video of Dick and Rick Hoyt running in marathons and competing in triathlons. Like Appleby, Rick Hoyt has cerebral palsy. At the time, Appleby was 16.

After the video, Carter asked Paul Appleby and his parents if Paul wanted to race with him.

Since that first race nine years ago, the two have competed in 11 marathons, 9 half-marathons and dozens of smaller competitions for a total of 89 races.

They have raced in 36-degree weather and trained in 90-degree heat. They have logged miles on flat wheelchair tires and with a broken handle bar. They are on their third wheelchair with this one custom designed for racing and to fit Appleby’s body.

As a way to train for the Boston Marathon, Carter and Appleby have been running on Saturdays on the rolling hills behind Germantown Baptist Church. With hills, the hardest

part isn't going up, but rather going down — racing wheelchairs don't have breaks. Carter has to hold onto both Appleby and the chair with a total weight of 143 pounds.

Before a race, Appleby often leaves Carter an inspiring message on his voice mail. Without pausing, Appleby races through his words to Carter: "Never quit. Never stop. Never look back. Don't stop believing, Mr. Gene. We've got a big race Sunday. We can do it. We can. We can. We can."

Over the years, Carter has had his own share of life's handicaps. A head injury forced him to give up college football and caused him to have seizures. Surgery stopped the seizures but messed up his back. He's gone through a divorce and lost his job.

He takes Appleby's words to heart. "The boy has given me so much," Carter said. "I always feel like I owe him something."

For Appleby, racing is his ministry: "I'm doing it for God," he said, "and nobody else."