

I'm doing it all over again ... and this time I want to beat that panto horse

After last year's ordeal he vowed not to do another London Marathon. But **David Cohen** is running to boost the Standard's appeal

THE DISPOSSESSED FUND

NEVER again!" I vowed last year, after hobbling painfully across the London Marathon finish line in just under five hours, overtaken in the final mile by a ninja turtle and a pantomime horse. "Never again," I promised my wife Pam, who bore the invasion of our weekends by hellishly long training runs on condition I never take on something that stupid again.

And yet on Sunday when some 37,500 runners line up in Blackheath for the 2013 race, I will, once more, be among them, raising money for the Evening Standard's Dispossessed Fund.

The explosions that cruelly ripped apart last weekend's Boston Marathon causing loss of life and limbs will make taking part all the more poignant.

Sonal Shah, who heads the London Community Foundation and administers the Dispossessed Fund, had asked if I would run again. As to why I broke my vow, I blame the pantomime horse. I felt compelled to make a more elegant fist of it and improve my time – we runners are an odd lot – and said yes.

Whereas last year, aged 50, I endured the punishing training schedule on my own, now I would gather friends to run with me. But Patrick Tobin and Jonathan Wilson, 61 and 57 respectively, were barely fit enough to do a five-mile fun-run. When I asked Patrick, owner of wholesaler Marigold Health Foods, his wife Lora snorted with disdain, insisting

he was "too old" and a marathon was "so far beyond him it was a joke".

Jonathan, an architect, had "zero desire" to indulge such insanity. "No bloody way!" he said. "I don't need you to set my personal goals." But on hearing that Patrick was doing it, he gave a wry smile and said: "Okay, I'm in."

My final invite was to Jonny Broomborg, 52, CEO of South African health insurer Discovery Health, with three London Marathons under his belt. As he lives in Johannesburg, he would train separately. His wife Lauren identified with Pam's complaints last year about my obsessive training – including that I became "more interested in my body than in hers" – emailing me: "Are you mad? I don't think this is good for your marriage or for ours!" Our team of alter kakers – roughly translated from Yiddish as "old farts" – was in place, each running to raise thousands of pounds for the Dispossessed Fund. Its cash goes to projects helping people in the capital who suffer poverty and disadvantage.

We started with a one-hour, six-mile run on the first Sunday in November. My aim was to build up gradually, increasing our weekend training by 10 per cent a week. I suggested the others also get in a couple of shorter runs during the week, as I did, but Jonathan said he had no time and Patrick insisted he was more likely to remain injury-free if

he had six days to recover. To train just once a week for a marathon is unheard of. They would attempt to turn traditional marathon theory on its head.

By January we had built our Sunday runs up to two hours. But as we headed into February and March we hit the skids: my right knee seized up, Patrick developed issues with his foot, and Jonathan began to run out of puff. I asked Mark Freeman, 31, a personal trainer who does 100-mile ultra-marathons for fun, to help. He took us to Alexander Palace Park one snowy morning, admitting his usual clientele "tended to be a lot younger" and Patrick was "possibly the oldest person" he had worked with. Mark lost seven toenails and hallucinated during his last 100-miler, which put our travails into perspective. He gave us muscle strengthening exercises and help with nutrition.

Patrick and Jonathan largely ignored his advice. Patrick devised a running brew – drinking yoghurt, coconut milk and lime – and a race-day strategy of jogging four minutes and walking one. Jonathan declared that sweet sports drinks made him

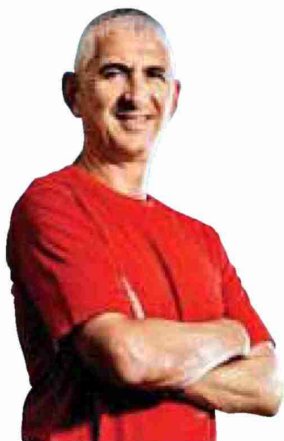
nauseous and he would run "on water alone", despite Mark explaining our muscles hold enough glycogen for just two hours and need to be replenished to avoid "hitting the wall". Jonathan quipped: "I will put myself forward for

study to medical science.”

By late March, Patrick completed a 25-miler. Jonathan found an energy drink to his liking and got in a final training trudge of 22 miles. Lora had given her approval, adding: “I support you, but if you come back injured, I’ll do you in!” Acupuncture cleared up my knee and I started running better than ever. Inspired by my mates, I have trained far less this year, but put in longer weekend sessions, including my longest run three weeks ago of 23 miles.

If all goes to plan Jonny and I will shuffle across the line in a touch under four-and-a-half hours, Jonathan 30 minutes later, and Patrick half an hour after him. Whatever our times, I will feel incredibly proud if our marathon virgins simply finish. I’ll be enormously grateful if my knees hold out and, as I puff along Embankment on those final agonising miles, I am not the sap every other runner is overtaking. Especially, please, not that pantomime horse.

■ *To support David’s Virgin London Marathon run for The Dispossessed Fund, visit uk.virginmoneygiving.com/DavidCohen*



Friends: David Cohen, Jonathan Wilson and Patrick Tobin train at Alexandra Palace. Jonny Broomberg, below, will join them in Sunday’s race



NIGEL HOWARD