

Always Up for a Challenge

After Parkinson's diagnosis, lifelong athlete still loves to move

When you complete a five-mile run at the age of four, people begin to have certain expectations—such as that you might grow into a formidable athlete. This was the case with Lyle Gibson, who when four years old snuck out of his West Burlington, Iowa, house and ran through the busy city streets to his father's office downtown.

This is one of the many stories Lyle relates in his new book, *A Lifetime in Motion: Lessons Learned From a Student of the Game(s)*. The book goes on to describe Lyle's lifelong love of athletics, both as a participant and a coach.

"As far back as I remember, I just loved anything to do with athletics," Lyle said. "That has stayed with me for 62 years. But baseball is my favorite." Like many boys, he graduated from tossing balls in the yard to Little League, then played throughout grade school. Unlike many boys, he became a two-time all-state second baseman and received a scholarship to play college baseball.

While he continued playing in college, he discovered a new passion—tennis. During his sophomore year, a friend invited him to play. "I found out I had an ability for it," said Lyle. "You're constantly hitting the ball, constantly on the move. I was hooked."

After graduation, Lyle made tennis his career through coaching and teaching, and entered tournaments throughout his 20s. A career highlight was playing a doubles match against Kyle Fuchs, who would go on to win Wimbledon and a gold medal at the Olympics. At around 30, Lyle stopped playing in tournaments, though he still played recreationally, and moved on to the next stage of his athletic life.

It came about unexpectedly when a friend asked Lyle if he wanted to train for a marathon with him. While Lyle had done some running throughout his life as conditioning for other sports, he'd never enjoyed it. "I'm not sure why, but I told him I'd train with him," said Lyle. "That was in January. We decided to run the Drake Relays—only three months away."

Lyle trained hard, and in April, ready or not, he traveled with his family to Des Moines. "I can still remember at mile 23 thinking that this was the stupidest thing I'd ever done," said Lyle. "I thought, 'God, if you can get me to the finish line I'll never do this again.' When I got to the finish line I saw my three little boys and my wife with tears in her eyes—it was very touching. Afterwards, all I wanted to know was how I could go faster to qualify for the Boston Marathon." Lyle would go on to run in 15 more marathons, including in Boston 7 times.

"I was still running well into my 40s, though my times were going up. I thought age was meaningless and I could keep going forever," said Lyle. By his late 50s, he was having some trouble with his toes curling under on longer runs. Eventually he went to the University of Iowa Hospital, and they diagnosed him with runner's dystonia, a condition characterized by involuntary muscle spasms. The doctor prescribed medication that helped, and Lyle returned to running. He was also coaching high school baseball at that time.

During the summer of 2013, Lyle began experiencing dizziness, memory problems, and other abnormal symptoms. However, he was able to ignore it until one typical Iowa summer day—95° and humid—when his baseball team had a double header. Before the games, he felt extremely dizzy and lightheaded. “On my way from the dugout to coaching first base I found myself weaving and running sideways,” said Lyle. “My biggest worry was that the fans would think I was drunk!” After the games, he couldn’t remember where he had parked his car. Anxious and embarrassed, he waited until everyone else left so that no one would see him wandering around.

Spurred into action, he researched his symptoms on the internet and decided he had Parkinson’s disease. After more testing, the doctors agreed, diagnosing him with PD just before Christmas 2013.

“Running a marathon is a tough challenge, but nothing compares to having an incurable disease,” said Lyle. “The diagnosis hit me hard at first, but I’ve come to realize that my love for movement continues.” He has exercised every day since the diagnosis, normally doing 10 minutes of yoga and stretching in the morning followed by 45 – 90 minutes of running or biking. “I’m not a scientist, but I believe that it has helped. The doctor at the University of Iowa told me he doesn’t see any progression, though I know it could happen at any time.”

Lyle continues to coach high school baseball and tennis—he attempted to retire a couple years ago, but just couldn’t stay away. At first he didn’t want his team and others to know about the diagnosis: “It was almost embarrassing, but now I want to show people that I can still have a good life, and there are lessons to be learned every day,” said Lyle.

His family continues to support him—his wife of 42 years, Janice, three grown sons, Jason, Justin, and Jonn, two daughters-in-law, and four grandchildren. His father, who has passed, was a fanatical athlete as well, and his nearly 90-year-old mother still works out twice every day. “I’ve been pretty fortunate as far as my family goes,” said Lyle.

A Lifetime in Motion, Lyle’s book, was started before he was diagnosed at the encouragement of his wife, who thought he had plenty of stories to tell. He later added an unplanned final chapter about Parkinson’s. He is currently using the book to help him speak to others about PD, especially focusing on inspiring them to exercise. The book is available for purchase on Amazon.com and has been endorsed by the Michael J. Fox Foundation. “It’s just been a lot of fun, and has taken mind off the disease itself,” said Lyle. “I’m hopeful I can do some good.”