

A tale of two marathoners

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Passions always run high among the masses of amateur runners who start the New York City Marathon, but those emotions could be more complicated Sunday as the race winds its way through a city still reeling from the staggering personal tragedies and property loss left by Hurricane Sandy.

Some entrants think it's even more important to run this year. Some can't bring themselves to take part. Here are two representative stories:

Running in Indy instead



Courtesy of Jack Christiansen

Jack Christiansen: "I don't fault [organizers] for trying to go ahead with it, but it just didn't feel right to me."

Jack Christiansen of Zionsville, Ind., a purchasing manager for a company that supplies parts to the NASCAR and IndyCar racing series, ran his first-ever marathon in New York City in 2008 and has completed five more since. "It was awesome," he said. "That's why I've been trying to get back in through the lottery ever since."

He said he'll never forget the wall-to-wall crowds that greet runners coming into Manhattan. "There's nothing like seeing people 10 deep, cheering for you," he said. "I don't think you're going to see 2 million people on the course this year. Part of my decision is selfish, but part of it is because I think the city's resources could be better used."

Christiansen, 41, decided against making the trip earlier this week. He said the images of coastal devastation, and jarring urban scenes such as the flooded South Ferry Terminal in Lower Manhattan, made him feel uncomfortable about running through the streets for his

own pleasure. He canceled his flight and hotel room and said he isn't sweating the loss of his \$250 entry fee. He plans to take advantage of his guaranteed slot for 2013.

"It was a tough decision," Christiansen said. "I really had to think about it. You train for 16 weeks, and then there's the monetary investment, but it's hard to worry about that when some people have lost everything.

"That's where I really struggle with them keeping the race going. I don't think people are going to rally around it, or that this is what's going to bring the city back. I don't think this is what they're looking for as an uplifting story. I don't fault [organizers] for trying to go ahead with it, but it just didn't feel right to me."

Christiansen said he has heard the symbolism of the race compared to the 2001 edition, which took place two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and was widely hailed as a moving tribute to the city's vitality and resiliency. He views this situation very differently. "After 9/11, New York was making a point to the world," he said. "You can't make a point to Mother Nature."

In an email late Thursday, Christiansen said he'd found a way to register late for a marathon in Indianapolis this weekend.

Determined to make it there



Courtesy of Eric Nelson

Eric Nelson: "The marathon and the storm have a lot in common. It's about endurance. Fighting through things. Nothing's going to be easy."

Four years ago this week, Eric Nelson of Washington, D.C. -- a journalist and avid runner -- had just finished a half-marathon in his former home of Dallas when he was hit by a car that plowed into him and two other people in a crosswalk, hurling him under a parked vehicle. His grave injuries included numerous broken bones, including broken vertebrae in his neck, and a traumatic brain injury.

Like a stroke victim, Nelson had to re-learn a lot of small motor skills from scratch. He had a rod inserted in one leg and still suffers from daily discomfort. "That's my new normal," he said. But he has finished three marathons since the incident -- the first being New York City in 2010 -- and intends to be at the start Sunday. He runs because he can, and he believes

staging the race could be a much-needed dose of normalcy to a wounded city in the same way it was for him personally.

"I think the marathon is appropriate in a lot of ways," said Nelson, 42, the transportation editor for Politico.com, a job that coincidentally has called for him to monitor the problematic public transit situation in the New York region this week.

"It reminds me of what it takes to be tough and resilient. I think this is going to be a really emotional, memorable marathon. I think it's suitable. I don't have mixed feelings."

As of Thursday, Nelson still wasn't sure exactly how he was going to get to New York City, and his midtown Manhattan hotel lacked heat and hot water. "Not that it matters," he said. "The marathon and the storm have a lot in common. It's about endurance. Fighting through things. Nothing's going to be easy."

Nelson is inching back toward his pre-accident personal best of 3:31, having run 4:47 in New York in 2010, 4:11 in Chicago in 2011 and just under four hours in Dallas late last year. But he won't run for time alone Sunday -- he's raising money for shoe4africa.org.

"I hope there aren't people out there angry or protesting," Nelson said. "My experience is that people really embrace that day."