

Email leads to spot in Boston

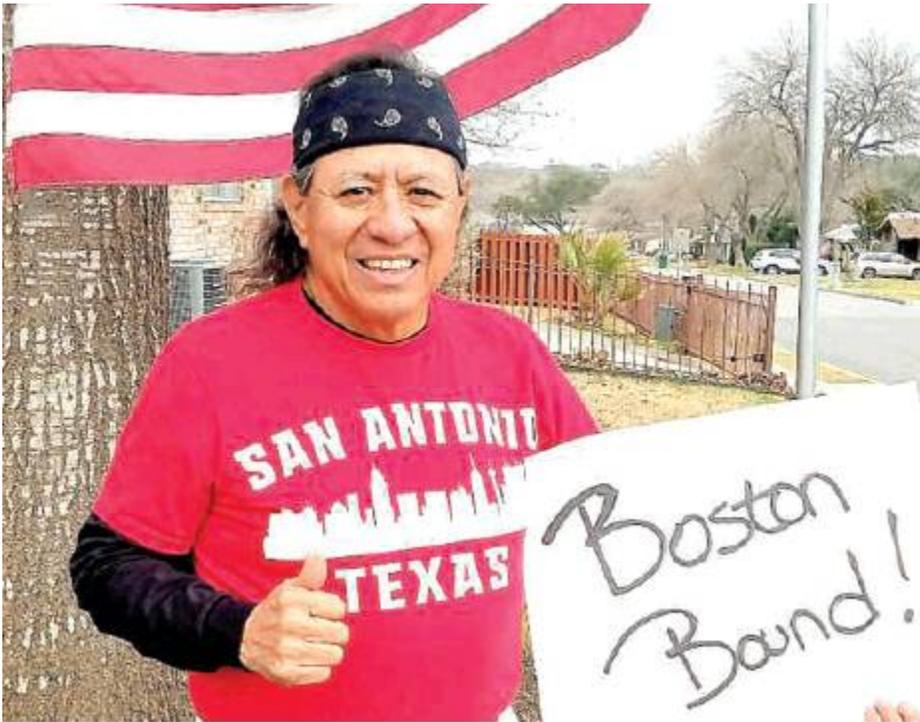
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For some, distance running is recreation. Others do it for exercise. A few runners are so good at it, they can earn a living doing it.

Then there are the people who run because it's an uncontrollable jones that must be fed.

The argument for running as an addiction is exemplified in Fernando Leos, 67. A retired Air Force master sergeant who ran military personnel offices for 25 years, Leos will compete late Monday morning in the 122nd Boston Marathon.



The Boston is considered the Holy Grail by every distance runner. It's tough to qualify for the race, since it accepts only the best marathoners.

Leos is not one of them. Yet he will be starting the Fourth Wave, Third Corral of the classic event.

Not so fast. If Boston runners are fast and Leos is not so fast, how did he fast track his way into the race?

Easy. He did it through irony.

The story begins when a pint-sized, middle school Leos took to running because he was too small for any other sport. He liked road racing and when he entered Sam Houston High, he ran cross country.

This took place against the backdrop of America's full-bore involvement in Vietnam. For several years, high school grads such as Leos were sitting ducks for the Selective Service.

Courtesy photo

Fernando Leos, an Air Force retiree, will be running the Boston Marathon despite not having a qualifying time.



Courtesy photo

Fernando Leos ran cross country at Sam Houston High School and has used running as a stress reliever for much of his life.

Leos enlisted in the Air Force, and while those documents were being processed, his birthdate came up in the very first Vietnam War lottery in 1970.

“That’s the one lottery,” he said, “you don’t want to win.”

Leos’ enlistment took precedence over the draft number, however, so he wasn’t funneled to another service as a draftee. He got to pick his path.

He went to basic training at Lackland. After that, Leos learned the art of Paperwork Fu at an Air Force training school for office management.

While paperwork runs the military, it’s also the bane of every service member’s existence. He (or she) who controls paperwork knows its weaknesses. It is a skill few can master.

Leos continued to run. He continued to run after being sent to Austin, Belgium, Germany and in Nebraska. He ran when stationed on the Johnston Atoll, an island so tiny it could be covered in wall-to-wall carpet in a weekend.

“Running was a big stress reliever for me,” Leos said. “It helped me unwind. It cleared my mind of all that paperwork.”

Remember all of that stuff about paperwork. It’s foreshadowing.

Leos was running when he returned to San Antonio for good in 1985. He retired from the military in 1994 and gave up running for 10 years. Then he went back to running. He retired from civil service in 2012. He continued to run.

All of this running had taken Leos nowhere. The fickle feet of fate, however, were about to kick into gear and lead him to the last place he ever thought he’d find himself.

He knew he couldn’t qualify for the Boston, so he went looking for a loophole. As a Paperwork Ninja, Leos knows there’s always a loophole.

He found it in the personage of legendary runner Bill Rodgers. He met Rodgers at one of the 11 marathons Leos has run since his first in 1979.

Late last year, on a lark, Leos fired off a note to Rodgers looking for running tips. An email conversation began, culminating in Leos working up the courage to ask about a backdoor into the race.

Rodgers’ suggestion: Find an official Boston Marathon charity, each of which gets a handful of free entries, and offer to raise money for that group in return for a running slot.

Bingo! That's a loophole!

Leos' way into the Boston's crowded and elite field would not come from sweat and endurance, but rather from a weakness in the race's rules.

After decades of running because of paperwork, Leos will now be running the race of his life thanks to paperwork.

Yahtzee! Irony!

Wake Up Narcolepsy, a charity dedicated to raising awareness of and funding research into the disease, took Leos on as a runner.

Narcolepsy affects an estimated 1 in 2,000 people in the United States. That's 200,000 Americans and approximately 3 million people worldwide. It is estimated that only 25% of people who have narcolepsy have been diagnosed and are receiving treatment.

Groups, companies and individuals have committed to donations totaling \$7,500 for the charity on Leos' behalf.

Leos will help narcolepsy victims. And thanks to a mastery of paperwork, he will run through a loophole to the Boston Marathon's finish line. rbragg@express-news.net