ARRESTED DEVELOPMENTS

Thirty years ago, an unlikely hero completed the cross-Canada run that Terry Fox inspired. Why Steve Fonyo—Man of the Year, frequent felon—must never be forgotten

BY GUY SADDY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLO RICCI

EVEN FROM A DISTANCE, to those who remember, he is unmistakable. The jaw seems more square, the chest and shoulders broader, but the gait, stiff and distinctive, announces the man puttering around this Surrey backyard is Steve Fonyo.

He walks toward me as his wife, Lisa, emerges from their $600-a-month basement suite. This is a working man's yard, strewn with projects. A front-loading washing machine, its white sides scarred with black spray paint, rests next to a packed tool shed. There are engines in various states. The middle of the yard is dominated by a huge tower fixed with four large generator-powered lights, which probably hasn't endeared him to his neighbours.

"So far, we've had no complaints," he says.

"No complaints?" says Lisa.

Always his own man, Fonyo works for himself, although much of what occupies his time is unpaid favours for friends. "He tends to take on a lot of charity work," says Lisa. For a moment, I think she's joking. Like her husband, Lisa has had legal troubles. In 2010, she did a short stint in jail for theft, the timing of which almost caused her to miss their wedding. Today, her shoulder-length brown hair is subtly streaked with purple.

He disappears into the shed then returns carrying a shining silver, custom-machined camshaft. "Sixteen hundred bucks," he tells me. "I just paid it off two days ago. Zero balance. All paid." He often speaks in clipped phrases. Sometimes, he'll use "buddy" as a pronoun: *Buddy said this*, *Buddy did that*. Today, he's dressed completely in black: black pants, black Auto Value Parts Store T-shirt, and black baseball cap worn to hide his thinning hair, which bothers him.

The camshaft will go into a restored 1986 Buick Grand National sedan, one of the last of its line, a black-on-black beast of a vehicle parked under a plastic tarp. "That's my baby. She's a creampuff," he says, running his hand along a fender. "It's got no cancer—no rust, eh?" In its final production year the Grand National's intercooled engine churned out 387 foot-pounds of torque, which propelled it over a quarter-mile in 14.23 seconds, a time that embarrassed sexier, better-bred competitors like Corvette. But it was boxy and brutish, with limited appeal. After its production run, except with a small number of diehard enthusiasts, it was scrubbed from the collective memory.

Once, Steve Fonyo, 48, was arguably the most famous person in Canada. Thousands cheered him at B.C. Place as he neared his final destination, Mile 0 on Vancouver Island near a stretch of rock and sand that would be rechristened Fonyo Beach. Streets were named after him; songs heralded his epic Journey for Lives. Steve Fonyo Day was declared by Toronto, London, Ottawa, Winnipeg, and others. Restaurant managers would shake their heads when he reached for his wallet. Man of the Year. Athlete of the Year. He met George Harrison, and Charles and Diana. People wanted to tell him painful stories of loss, to hand him money, to touch him. To be like him.

Nobody wants to be like Steve Fonyo today. There were the serial drunk-driving convictions, followed by theft, assault, and jail time. Cheque kiting. Credit card and insurance fraud. Cocaine and alcohol abuse. Claims of repentance and rehabilitation, followed by more crimes, followed by more repentance until no one much cared whether he repented or not. Then, as a crowning ignominy, the youngest person ever to receive the Order of Canada became one of the very few directed to return it.

But on May 29, 1985, Steve Fonyo, a teenager who lost his leg to cancer when he was only 12, fulfilled the aborted dream of another one-legged athlete by running 7,924 kilometres, raising $13.5 million for cancer research, education, and treatment. No matter what he has done since, no matter how complicit he has been in his own unravelling, this cannot be taken away from him. Except, of course, it has.

Ask 10 schoolkids, "Who is Terry Fox?" and you'll get 10 articulate answers—hardly surprising, since from the time they enter kindergarten they're immersed in his lore. Ask the same 10 about Fonyo and you'll draw blanks.

Stephen Charles Fonyo Jr. was born in Montreal on June 29, 1965, the younger child of Anna and Steve Fonyo Sr., who immigrated to Canada after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. When Steve was four, the family moved to B.C., to a house located only a few blocks from where he lives today. Never a good student, he liked math and science but failed English. Today, he can write but barely read. "I hate reading," he says. "I just can't do it, man." Was he ever diagnosed with a learning disability? "Some say yes, some say no. I don't think I have one." In Grade 10, he dropped out of Immaculate Conception High School, one of North Delta's finest, to work in a lawnmower and chainsaw shop. He made $800 a month, enough to buy and trick out his first car before he was old enough to legally drive it.

A few years earlier, however, the event that would shape his life occurred. "My dad's the one that told me that my leg has to come off. That I had bone cancer. I didn't even know what cancer was. I thought he was joking; I started laughing my head off," he says. "Then I saw my mom bawling her eyes out, and I thought, 'Holy shit, this is not a joke.'" It must have been devastating. Yet he insists he was young enough simply to accept it: "I wouldn't let it stop me from doing anything I wanted to do. And it hasn't."

The idea to run across Canada to help fight cancer was clearly not his own. When Fonyo was 14, he saw Terry Fox speak in Stanley Park and

found himself listening carefully. After Fox died in 1981, Fonyo received an epiphany of sorts, directing him to finish what Fox could not. "It came to me overnight. It was like a dream or something, like another force." At first, he resisted. He'd never liked sports and wasn't athletic even before his leg was removed. Plus, he was hardly philanthropic. "My heart wasn't there, not like Terry Fox's. I always was a nice guy—I like helping people—but I wasn't interested in any way in running across Canada."

The idea haunted him, however. He couldn't get it out of his head. Finally he unloaded on a few people, including his doctor. "What I was hoping for was, 'You're crazy, just relax, take it easy,' but I didn't get any of that. I was getting support. Which was the last thing I wanted."

> "Once, Steve Fonyo was the most famous person in Canada. Man of the Year. Athlete of the Year"

Not everyone was supportive. Many local disabled athletes who had rallied around Terry Fox shunned Fonyo, chafing at his arrogance. Fonyo's initial attempts to get the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Cancer Society onboard were rejected—with good reason, says Peter Caldwell, who was belatedly hired in 1984 to coordinate Fonyo's already-in-progress run. "After Terry died, the cancer society was being besieged by people who wanted to do something," he says. "People had wild and wacky ideas. They wanted to pogo-stick across Canada; they wanted to roller-skate across Canada." But the society was very protective of Fox's image and was wary about getting involved in anything that could taint either of them. Everybody got the brushoff.

After being practically thrown out of the charity's office, Fonyo claims, his resolve was cemented. On March 31, 1984, with the cancer society still on the sidelines, Steve Fonyo dipped his artificial leg into the ocean at St. John's, Newfoundland, beginning the Journey for Lives. From the outset, there were problems. Trainer Romeo Gadbois quit early on, accusing the 18-year-old of fabricating ailments. Unsubstantiated rumours of donation skimming were whispered, as were accusations—patently false, according to Caldwell—that Fonyo cheated by occasionally grabbing a ride. Fonyo's father, headstrong and unyielding, was a constant thorn to many. And always present, the spectre of Terry Fox, haunting the run and diminishing the runner by contrast.

There was also the man himself. Fonyo would sometimes not show for scheduled events, and when he did, he'd often give the same tired, uninspiring speech he'd given the day before, and the day before that. He was too gruff, too churlish, too inarticulate to warm to.

Yet after Fonyo passed Thunder Bay, the marker where Fox was forced to abandon his dream, something changed. As he got farther west, the crowds grew larger, more enthusiastic. He won our respect when he conquered the Prairies in the dead of winter; it deepened when he traversed the Rockies. On May 29, 1985, when Fonyo poured a vial of Atlantic seawater into the Pacific at Mile 0, he was anointed a true Canadian hero, one of the very few. We might never have loved him as much as his predecessor, but we calibrated our expectations and toasted him as a different kind of champion: a man of the people, Everyman. He had no airs. He was one of us.

But in celebrating him, we blurred the distinction between the actor and the act. This was entirely understandable and wholly unfortunate. It is, of course, a tautology to say that without Steve Fonyo there would have been no run. It is, however, equally true to say that without the run, there would have been no Steve Fonyo, at least as he eventually became. It made him, defined him publicly, cast parameters around who and what he could be, squeezing him into a role for which he was almost uniquely unsuited. How unsuited would soon become apparent.

Last evening, Fonyo was sick. Flat on his ass, writhing on the floor sick. He's feeling better now, but the night was long and hard. "It was bad," he says. "I was that close to going to emergency.

Over the last while, he's been throwing up. He smokes, Canadian Blue King Size. He thinks the cause of his current difficulties could be a vitamin deficiency.

"He eats a lot of junk food," says Lisa.

"Not that much."

"When you go to the store you buy ice cream, cereal, milk, and usually chocolate. That's your four staples right there."

The Fonyo home is filled with plants and tchotchkes. Lisa's camera collection—notable for its combination of digital point-and-shoots and vintage Yashicas and Brownies—is dispersed throughout the living room. A dozen decades-old *Playgirl* magazines are arranged in a fan on a television stand. I ask about them. "I got really lucky," says Lisa, setting two iced teas down on the coffee table. "I got the whole set."

On the wall is another collection. "Steve Fonyo—Canada's Hero, MAN OF THE YEAR" blares the framed front page of the *Calgary Sun*'s February 26, 1986, edition, with a photo of a young man in a white turtleneck surrounded by a jubilant crowd, his prosthetic hydracadence leg concealed by a pair of grey slacks.

Next to it hangs the Order of Canada, our second-highest civilian honour, bestowed upon Fonyo when he was 19. And next to that, a formal-looking letter, also framed. Dated January 11, 2010, it reads, in part: "Dear Mr Fonyo, this is to inform you that the Advisory Council of the Order of Canada has recommended that your appointment to the Order of Canada be terminated. The Governor General has accepted the recommendation."

The reframing began within months of his run. In February 1986 there was a small item, buried in the back pages, about a bench warrant issued for failing to pay a $30 speeding ticket—nothing, really. His first major setback occurred a month later when it was revealed that Monte Morris Friesner, the man he had chosen to manage his career and guide his nascent foundation, had a lengthy criminal record for fraud, assault, arson, and possession of stolen property. Negative press ensued, questioning Fonyo for

putting his reputation and legacy at risk.

In matters of judgment, for good and mostly ill, Fonyo has always trusted his instincts. However, for much of his early life—and throughout the run, to the irritation of his cancer society handlers—he relied heavily on his father for guidance and support. That would end in late 1986, when Steve Sr. died of lung cancer. For Fonyo, then just 21, it was crushing. "He was my best friend. My No. 1 guy," he says, fighting back tears. "I had nobody in my life. Nobody." Lost and self-destructive, he treated his despair with alcohol and eventually attempted suicide when he intentionally drove his convertible over a cliff near Falkland, B.C.

The death of his father was, he says, the catalyst for his downfall. But signs of trouble were already there. In 1982, Fonyo picked up his first conviction for driving under the influence, reports of which surfaced only after two successive drunk-driving convictions in 1988. During the run, it was well-known he would cut loose on weekends, sometimes going off the radar for two days at a time.

Instead of reporting this, though, many in the media kept it under wraps for fear of jeopardizing the cause by presenting a less than flattering portrait of the man who was by then being groomed to assume the Fox mantle.

If the media was co-opted by the Journey for Lives, so was Fonyo. After the run he had no idea how to live up to an image that never fit. Chances were given and squandered. A $30,000 grant for helicopter pilot training turned out to be a bust. Predictably, a banking job in Edmonton never panned out. A stint at the University of Alberta, which waived his tuition, was a disaster, says ex-girlfriend Marie Guerra, who lived with him for seven years in Edmonton in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "He was mechanically inclined," she says. "If he had gone to school at NAIT [the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology], it probably would have been way better for him."

By the early 1990s, his infractions, though still minor, were mounting, and his attempts at contrition never rang true. It was in Edmonton that Stephen Charles Fonyo Jr., O.C., while intermittently wasted on coke and booze, racked up the 16 charges that would finally send him to jail for the first time. "From Hero to Zero" was the headline cliché.

Since 2007, he has appeared in court on 28 separate occasions. The last time he was sentenced to jail was in 2010, for stealing thousands of dollars' worth of gas with doctored credit cards. On this score, he's unrepentant. "This system worked so well it was just fuckin' unbelievable. And you know, I'd say 60, 70 percent of it—I gave it away. Like Robin Hood. I didn't make money. I could have been a millionaire."

Then what was the point? "Why did I do it?" he says, grinning and turning to Lisa. "Maybe you can tell me."

Lisa sighs. "The excitement? Thrill? Beating the system? There are many reasons why you do things," she says.

He seems proud of the scam. "Yeah, I am. I'm not sure how to explain it. Maybe we test ourselves to see how smart we really are," he says, "or what we are capable of doing. I wanted to just see if I could do it. I wanted to see if it was possible."

There was another payout. It's a rush that, once you get used to it, must be difficult to kick. When he dispensed the stolen gas, people lined up around the block. Once again, Fonyo was front and centre. "I wish you were there to take a picture of it. Everybody loved me."

It's true Fonyo has sinned. His sins, however, need context. In the pantheon of fallen heroes, he is no O.J. Simpson or Phil Spector, and his arrest record would not raise an eyebrow if he were not himself. Much of what he has done, many have done: a bit of blow in the '80s, driving home after a few too many. Yet there is something undeniably greasy about the range and nature of his offences. We can excuse vice and addiction. But who kites $10,000 worth of cheques? Who pawns their car, then steals it back? What kind of national hero rips off a Superstore on Canada Day? Who chooses to go pedal-to-the-metal and outrun the cops? At almost 50?

The vast majority of his crimes have been petty and almost exclusively nonviolent. But there have been exceptions. Over the years, Fonyo has acquired three assault convictions, including one in 1995 for using a crescent wrench in a fight with his Edmonton landlord, whose wound required almost 30 stitches. The two more recent assaults, in 2009 and 2011—both involved Lisa and ended in convictions—are, in a way, more disturbing.

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It is an unpleasant and awkward subject to broach. When I do, there is silence. Lisa looks at Steve. "Well," I continue, "it's up to you guys if you want to say something."

"I really don't want to," Lisa says faintly.

Steve turns to me. "No. People want to know," he says. "I'll tell you what happened—"

"You're not going to tell the whole story, so you should just leave it alone," says Lisa.

"I'm gonna tell him something that's close to it. Okay?"

The story involves the attempted

exchange of a soldering torch and an ensuing argument with a Walmart employee and a store manager. Police are called, and Fonyo flees. The police eventually swarm his place, guns pulled. He's arrested but released. Later, he and Lisa get into an argument. 911 is called. Unluckily for Fonyo, the same cop he ditched at Walmart responds.

"So now I'm charged with assault!" he says, his voice rising. Lisa, standing near the kitchen with her back toward us, stiffens.

I want to tell him to stop…

"I never fucking touched her!" he says. "She beat herself up."

"Pardon me?" shouts Lisa. "Now I'm pissed off! Now I'm pissed off!"

…but Steve Fonyo is, and has always been, his own man.

And then, in no uncertain terms, Lisa levels an ugly accusation she has made and retracted before.

I have no way to know what is or isn't true, but I do know this: if you tell Steve Fonyo not to do something, chances become infinitely greater he'll do it.

Today, Fonyo is content. Years ago, he quit cocaine cold turkey. He doesn't drink and despite his past doesn't consider himself an alcoholic. ("I don't know what an alcoholic is.") He's found his niche, and he's incredibly good at it. His eyes, which are sometimes almost expressionless, come to life when he talks about auto body repair.

"Look at this," he says, scrolling through photos on his phone, stopping at the remains of what was once a car. "That was T-boned. It was a Chrysler 300N. I had to replace the whole side. And I'll show you what it looks like after it's done," he says.

He brings up another photo. The repaired vehicle looks pristine. "How do you do that?" I ask.

"It's a gift. Some people are born with certain aptitudes, certain skills."

> "Sometimes I say the run is the best thing I've ever done in my life, and sometimes I say it's the biggest mistake I ever made"

And some people are born with a talent for making poor decisions. Had Fonyo been less volatile and more

strategic, he could have made the run work for him long after it was over. But the Journey for Lives did not pay dividends, largely because he was never cut out for what the role—for what we—demanded.

He knows it. "I'm not the guy for this. But nevertheless, I was the guy for it. For what reason? I don't know," he says. As for being who he is? There are no apologies. "I look at Rick Hansen on TV, and I go, 'You know, I don't know if it's real or not, but if it's not it's pretty sad.' Because the last thing I want to do is be somebody who I'm not," he says. "I'm not coached. This is the real Steve here."

Even as he descends further into obscurity the run continues to define him. "Sometimes I say it's the best thing I've ever done in my life, and sometimes I say it's the biggest mistake I ever made. 'How would my life have been if I didn't do it?' Of course I think about that," he says, wistfully. "Well, I know one thing for sure: it wouldn't have been as exciting."

As for his future, "I'm happy with what I've got. I want to stick around for a while," he says, a smile creeping across his face, "maybe aggravate the world a little longer."

In the Catholic tradition, the faith into which Stephen Charles Fonyo Jr. was born, there is a concept called dead works. It stipulates that any good and decent act, no matter how worthy of admiration and respect, is merely incidental if not dedicated to the greater glory of God. So if an unrepentant sinner does an admirable thing, that's fine. But good acts are essentially worth nothing in the greater scheme on their own. By condemning Fonyo and diminishing his act, we have rendered an equally harsh judgment.

I want to tell you a story. A young man performs a heroic deed. He is beloved and then, mainly through his own actions, becomes unloved over time. Absolution, should he ever seek it, will be difficult. But in the beginning, he accomplished an extraordinary thing. It has never been equalled and probably never will be. No matter what, this must never be forgotten. VM