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Metro Bus Operator Hector Lopez sits in a parked bus at Central City Division 2 holding up the May 18 edition of the *Daily Breeze*, which chronicled his first place victory at the Palos Verdes Marathon the day before. Lopez runs at least four to five full-length marathons every year.

Photo by Jimmy Stroup

Flipping Channels Gives Bus Operator the Marathon Bug

- Hector Lopez doesn't just run marathons – he wins them

By JIMMY STROUP

(June 18, 2008) Who would watch a marathon race on television from a comfortable sofa and think, "I could do that."

Well, Hector Lopez.

In 1991, the 23-year-old Hector Lopez was flipping channels and settled on coverage of the finish of a marathon race. He said to himself, "I could do that." Now he has run more than 40.

"I just had this strong feeling that I could do it, and my first one was the LA Marathon in 1991," the Crossroads Depot Division 2 bus operator says. "I trained myself for two months. I was really inexperienced and it was difficult for me; I almost quit."

"Inexperienced" is an understatement. Lopez, a part-time operator, had never really done anything athletic. In high school he says he went to the gym for about a month before he grew bored. He gave baseball a try, but dropped it.

"At one point in the race, I was closer to my house than I was to the finish

line, and I thought about catching a bus home," Lopez says. "After I finished, though, I was hooked. When you finish a race, you feel like you're reborn."

From inexperienced to expert

Only five years later, Lopez was running the 26-mile course in 2 hours 18 minutes – just 14 minutes slower than the current world record. But Lopez tends to downplay the elite level of competition he had joined.

"Sure, I was close to the record," he says. "But that 14-minute difference is a lot more work than it seems. I was training hard and in the best shape of my life, and that's the closest I ever came."

Now 40, Lopez runs marathons four or five times a year. On May 17, he ran and won the Palos Verdes Marathon. He ran the 26.2-mile course in 2 hours 43 minutes, beating his closest competitor by five minutes.

Lopez's age bracket – 40 and over – is referred to as the "Masters" bracket. Where once his goal was to finish a marathon and next to win one, Lopez's latest goal is to finish in the top spot in the national Masters marathon in Twin Cities, Minn. He finished 5th last year.

"The top competitors in the sport are young, that's true, but some older people are hanging in there," Lopez says. "I have friends in their 80s running marathons – and passing younger people right and left. There's no age limit to this sport."

Coming out on top

Lopez says marathon running is a strange sport because even though you run with hundreds or even thousands of people, you're really only competing against yourself.

"I recognize people who are competing at my level because we're at the same events all the time. I try not to get to know them too well or even pay attention to their names.

"I'm not trying to be unfriendly. I just don't want to harbor bad feelings against a certain guy because he beats me." But not knowing their name doesn't mean he doesn't know who they are.

"At the San Diego Marathon, I had been trailing this guy the whole race and it took me a long time to pass him," he says. "I saw him at mile 23. There was this turnaround and I thought, 'I have to get this guy.' I was feeling strong, so I turned it up some and finally caught him at mile 25."

Lopez ended up beating that competitor by 30 seconds, attributing his victory to his rigorous training.

Training and plans for the future

During a normal week, Lopez runs an average of 60 miles a week. When preparing for a race, that lengthens to 80 miles a week and is accompanied by a stricter diet regimen.

"You have to stay limber and stretched out, otherwise you're finished," he says. "And you have to keep the extra weight off. That makes a huge difference. Five pounds of extra weight is five pounds you have to carry with you for 26 miles."

Lopez doesn't have any special advice for achieving racing success. As tells

his son, who dabbles in running, "Running isn't magic. It's dedication."

"I hear people talking about height being a factor, or age – and I believe it may be an advantage to be short," the 5-foot-5-inch Lopez says. "But I think it's all about training in the end."

"Maybe later in life if I get less competitive, I may find a new hobby or [compete] part time," he says. "But probably not. I'm looking forward to competing in the next age bracket – and then the one after that."

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