

MARATHON EFFORT HITS HURDLE



By David Wiles

The heartbreaking news that my three-year-old daughter's friend had been diagnosed with an appalling – and ultimately terminal – illness triggered an immediate reaction from many who know him. His pre-school arranged a sale of the children's handiwork, while a family friend with a sideline as a photographer offered his services in return for a donation to the fund set up to give little Måns the best possible life before it is cut short.

Being British, I decided to do what thousands of my compatriots do to raise money for a good cause – I would run a marathon. Easy. I would train for a few months for the Stockholm marathon, pass the hat around, people would dig deep and I would raise money for Måns.

As I started to approach people to sponsor me, an unexpected hurdle appeared: Swedes don't do this sort of thing. And it's not just that they don't do this sort of thing; for many Swedes the whole idea of doing something challenging or dangerous or stupid to raise money for a good cause is totally alien. I have to admit that at first I did mistake the blank-faced responses and the lack of sudden movements in the direction of wallets for meanness.

To illustrate the national differences, compare these figures. Last year, 78 per cent of people taking part in the London marathon did so to raise money (and they raised €0m). The corresponding figure for the Stockholm marathon, according to the organisers, is "probably none".

In an effort to try to understand the reaction of my Swedish friends, I put out an intentionally provocative post on an online noticeboard. Why, I asked, weren't Swedes willing to sponsor me? "No one has the slightest idea what you're talking about," said one respondent. Another answered: "If you organise a marathon run who is it about? You or the boy or the money? I don't get it." Another asked: "What will this money be used for? Your running shoes, admissions fees and lost income while training? In that case I wouldn't want to contribute."

One response that hints at a possible explanation was: "We don't want to show off too much when we give. Being humble and all that. It's a Swedish trait." I think another reason why so many wallets were staying firmly in pockets is the good old national egalitarianism. Why give to just one poorly child when there are so many others? And then there is Sweden's number one obsession: taxes. We pay high taxes, and many expect that to cover the weak and needy, so why give more?

This is not meant to be an exercise in Swede-bashing, so let's put the topic into context. Few countries donated more after the Indian Ocean tsunami than Sweden (which gave about five times more per capita than Britain did). The country is one of only four nations

that meet or exceed the UN's target of giving 0.7 per cent of GDP for development assistance, and ranks fifth in terms of economic aid per capita – one place above the UK. So no one could accuse Swedes of being stingy.

Of course this comes down to basic national differences. My Swedish wife likes her fish pickled, I like mine battered and deep-fried. I say potato; she says potatis. Some of this Swedish willingness to give as a group – or to a group – but not on an individual basis could have something to do with an aversion to dealing with people one-to-one. This is, after all, the nation where apartment-dwellers are known to check through the peephole before opening the door for fear of running into a neighbour, and where starting up a conversation with a complete stranger in a bar is a sign of either madness or desperation. Again there is no criticism intended – I have myself been a hallway-scanner, and I too appreciate not having my ear bent by strangers.

But regardless of the interesting national comparisons and the global economics of giving, the most important thing here is of course little Måns, whose affliction is Duchennes Muscular Dystrophy. As the fundraising efforts continue, I understand now that there is no reason to be angry should my requests for sponsorship be declined. But on the other hand I will appreciate even more the generosity of those Swedish donations.

To find out more visit www.mansrundqvist.com

