

Now a 2-time survivor, Tedy Bruschi still tackling stroke awareness

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Tedy Bruschi running in the Falmouth Road Race in Massachusetts. Photo: Tedy's Team

Former NFL star Tedy Bruschi spent the last 14 years showing what a stroke survivor could do: continue playing pro football, climb Mount Kilimanjaro, run the Boston Marathon.

Now Bruschi is showing what a two-time stroke survivor can do.

Bruschi had his second stroke on July 4. Since then he's run a 7-mile road race, and every Sunday during the NFL season he'll appear on ESPN's "NFL Countdown" show.

Bruschi became a runner after retiring from football. He'd already started Tedy's Team to raise stroke awareness. Based in Boston, it only made sense the organization tapped into that city's famous marathon to help spread its message and raise money for research. And it only made sense for the founder to join them.

Supporting the cause wasn't the only reason. Bruschi also wanted to remain as healthy as possible.

Tremendous fitness at the time of his first stroke was a big reason he was able to return to the NFL only eight months later. He figured that continuing to remain in shape might help ward off a second stroke.

As a former linebacker, he had the perfect rationalization: "Defense is what I do for a living."

"There's never a 100 percent guarantee of preventing a stroke," he said. "But I figured that if it did ever happen again, I'd be prepared."

In April, Bruschi finished his third Boston Marathon. His trio of medals matched the number of Super Bowl rings he won with the New England Patriots.

On July 4, he ran 3 1/2 miles from his house to the high school where his sons attend. His wife Heidi, 14-year-old son Dante and 17-year-old son Rex drove there to meet him for a workout.

Tedy arrived first. He spent about 10 minutes cooling off and remaining loose. Once his family arrived, he reached down to pick up a mesh bag that held lightweight resistance bands. He grabbed the bag's straps with both hands. Only his right arm came up.

"What's going on?" he said.

The words came out garbled. His wife and sons looked at him. They noticed the left side of his face drooping.

Because of their involvement with Tedy's Team, everyone realized what was happening. Face drooping, arm weakness and speech difficulty are among the warning signs in the BE FAST acronym promoted by the organization.

"I had no freakout period at all," he said. "My concern was more about my sons being there."

Heidi called 911. In the ambulance, Bruschi regained feeling in his fingers and his speech began to improve. By the time they reached the hospital, Heidi noticed his face wasn't drooping as much.

He suffered a transient ischemic attack, known by the acronym TIA. It's also called a "warning stroke," as in potentially the precursor of something more severe.

The TIA caused no damage. He underwent extensive testing in search of what caused it. There was no definitive answer. The biggest finding involved a slight protein deficiency that's now being addressed with

medication.

"For a guy who always wants answers, I'm OK with it," he said. "They told me my heart's good, my vessels are good, my cholesterol is fine, I'm in great shape and I have a high level of fitness. So now I take a blood thinner and ..."

He paused, laughed, and added, "No more football comebacks."

Bruschi's first stroke hit in February 2005, nine days after his third Super Bowl championship, and just two days after playing in the Pro Bowl. At 31, he figured his poor balance, lack of vision in one eye and crushing headache were from football.

Further tests showed he had a blood clot in his brain. It was an ischemic stroke caused by a congenital birth defect known as patent foramen ovale, a hole in the heart that was supposed to close after birth but didn't. Many people have it and, like him, don't discover it until there's an event such as a stroke. Doctors fixed his via surgery.

Before Bruschi's first game back in the NFL, as he stood in the tunnel waiting to be introduced, he felt waves of emotion. Similar feelings washed over him on Aug. 18 – six weeks after his second [stroke](#) – as he stood at the starting line of the Falmouth Road Race in Massachusetts.

"I was thinking, 'I'm back again. This is comeback 2.0.'"

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