

FIRST PERSON

# Seeing the light

Running has been a salvation for David Bradford, 25, whose deteriorating sight robbed him of his first love

At the beginning of 2006, I had no inkling there was anything wrong with my eyesight. I spent my days riding powerful motorcycles at inappropriate speeds on roads and racetracks across the country. I'd been mad about bikes since I was 17. They were the adrenalin fix on which I was hooked, and had become my livelihood since landing my dream job as writer on a motorcycle magazine. But my time on two wheels was about to come to an abrupt end.

The only clue to an underlying problem with my sight was poor night vision. Through my teens and early 20s, the problem became more noticeable. In the summer of 2006, aged 24, I'd knocked over one too many pub stools and, certain the beer wasn't to blame, decided to ask my optician about it.

I dropped it in casually at a routine sight test. Rather than shrug reassuringly, my optician submitted me to a peripheral vision test: you stare into a darkened box, focus on a central dot, and press a button each time you see a flash of light in your peripheral vision. Let's just say I didn't trouble the button very many times. I was referred to a specialist, but it didn't take many minutes' Googling to uncover the most likely diagnosis - retinitis pigmentosa (RP).

RP is a genetic condition that affects the retina, causing it to self-destruct, gradually ruining my peripheral vision. It starts as night-blindness, progresses to tunnel vision, and can lead to complete blindness.

Further tests sealed my fate - it was definitely RP. I am losing my sight. Shortly after my diagnosis, I had to take another peripheral vision test, this time



for the DVLA. Predictably, I failed; my driving licence was revoked, and I was forced to hang up my motorcycle boots.

What's it like facing up to sight loss? The truth is, you don't. It's a gut-punch that forces you to catch your breath, but it's hardly something you can make peace with, nor run away from. And if you can't run away, I figured, you'd better just run.

I'd started running about a year before my diagnosis, just to keep fit, but now I'm considerably more serious about it. Training and racing particularly helped me get used to the idea of never being allowed to ride a motorbike again. Bikes were my number-one passion, and giving them up has been tough, but running is a great outlet for my pent-up frustration. My speedwork now takes place on the athletics track, rather than the racetrack.

Running has been my therapy, without which I'm genuinely uncertain how I'd have coped. I joined my local club, Lewes AC, started training four to five times a week, and recently set a new half-marathon PB of 1:17:54. Sight loss reminds you,

training is making sure I get back before nightfall. I know that difficulties lie ahead, as my visual world shrinks, but I'm determined to keep striving. This year's targets are to run a sub-35-minute 10K and a sub-three-hour marathon. The

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in a stark way, that your body is not infallible. Running fends off pessimism because it proves your body's power in a never-finished test, constantly reaching beyond what you thought possible. Yes, I admit I'm a running evangelist who won't rest until everyone I know is in shorts and trainers, but converts outnumber sceptics among my friends, so my congregation is growing.

My vision is still fairly normal, and the only limitation on

Flora London Marathon will be my first, which I'm running in support of blind runner Dave Heeley (a fellow RP sufferer), who is attempting to run seven marathons on seven continents in seven days. Dave proves that sight loss need not be a barrier to any challenge. Whether or not I can see the finish line, I'll keep pushing on.

Support David's Flora London Marathon attempt at [www.justgiving.com/davidbradford](http://www.justgiving.com/davidbradford)

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