When Suzanne Sortman arrived in Boston last month, the scene at first glance was anything but welcoming.

It was the Friday before the 118th running of the Boston Marathon, slated for April 21. Sortman, there to run the race for the third time, saw city streets lined with policemen, many of them with eagerly sniffing dogs in tow. The security forces continued to build throughout the weekend. A vacant car parked on Boylston Street, the site of the Marathon finish line, drew quick attention and the summons of a tow truck. Backpacks, once a staple of Marathon scenes, had vanished, replaced by clear plastic bags for runners’ gear.

Given the ominous overtones of the street scenes, Sortman would have been excused for feeling anxious about running the race. After all, she’d run in last year’s Marathon and been near the site of the infamous bombing that killed three people and injured hundreds of others. But the nurse manager of the inpatient ORs at University of Colorado Hospital was anything but intimidated by the show of force or by her memories of the previous year.

“I had no trepidation about running,” Sortman said. “I felt it was the right thing to do. I didn’t let my feelings and emotions creep in and make me afraid.”

No fear. She was speaking for many. One year after a backpack filled with explosives ripped through the assembled throngs on Boylston Street and placed the Boston area in a grip of terror, nearly 36,000 people showed up for the 2014 Marathon – one-third more than had run in 2013.

“The atmosphere was celebratory,” Sortman said. “It was almost like a symbol that said, ‘You can’t keep us down.’” Sortman got the message loud and clear. Entering the last two or three miles of the race, she heard an almost deafening roar from the crowd.

“There was yelling, clapping, whistling,” she said. “It gave me an extra surge.” Again, she wasn’t alone. Most years, runners at mile 23 have slowed to a walk as heavy fatigue sets in. This year, she said, nearly all managed at least a slow jog at the urging of the crowd.

Sortman would finish the race in four hours, 16 minutes – not her best time, but that was hardly the point. She and tens of thousands...
of others had shown up. As she strolled Boston’s streets with her husband and two sisters after the race, her medal around her neck, people patted her on the back, gave her high fives.

“It wasn’t so much that they were congratulating the accomplishment as they were giving us a feeling of gratitude for the perseverance,” Sortman said.

“The crowds were deeper and louder than before. There was no question about that,” agreed E. David Crawford, MD, head of the Urologic Oncology program at UCH, who completed his 18th consecutive Boston Marathon despite considerable physical challenges (see sidebar).

The enthusiasm of the crowds was evident not only in their size but in their commitment to supporting the runners, Crawford added. About 7,000 runners participated in his first Marathon, in 1997, and they all started at the same time, he recalled. This year, Crawford and his wife Jodi started in the last of five waves of runners – each separated by a half an hour – nearly two hours after the race began. Yet Crawford saw large crowds lining the streets throughout his entire run.

“The crowds didn’t change,” he said. “They were still there.”

Sortman has a tangible reminder of the spirit that permeated her Boston visit. Near the Old South Church on Boylston Street, runners received hand-knitted scarves collected from throughout the United States and from other countries as part of the church’s Boston Marathon Scarves Project. Each blue-and-yellow scarf included a tag detailing where it was made and by whom.

Sortman’s had a simple message: United. Be Strong. It hangs from a mirror at home, providing a message of encouragement.

“It gives me strength when I don’t have it,” she said.

Huge banner on Boylston Street delivered a now-familiar message.
Finish Line or Bust – Literally

Last year, E. David Crawford, MD, head of Urologic Oncology, was tantalizingly close to the finish line of the Boston Marathon when a terrorist bomb exploded, ending the race and cutting off Crawford from contact with his son, daughter-in-law, and infant grandson for 45 agonizing minutes before they were reunited, unharmed.

The 2014 Marathon would go off without a hitch, thanks to small armies of police and National Guardsmen. But simply showing up for the race this year required special determination from Crawford. About two months before the race, Crawford was in great shape. “I was headed for my best time,” he said. He ran for three hours before attending a meeting in Vail, after which he stepped onto a patch of black ice and went down heavily. He suffered a badly injured right hip and tore the rotator cuff in his left shoulder in three places.

Just like that, Crawford went from running 18 miles during training to struggling to go three. Shelving the Marathon for a year would have been understandable, but Crawford was reluctant to do so because of the disappointment of 2013. “I wanted to finish the race because it was taken away last year,” he said.

Back on track. He found a helping hand and kindred spirit in CU Sports Medicine surgeon Omer Mei-Dan, MD, aka television’s “Cutting Edge MD,” and an extreme sports enthusiast who has endured his share of serious injuries.

“Most physicians would have said to me, ‘Stop running and let it heal,’ but Omer understands the motivation of athletes,” Crawford said.

Mei-Dan had Crawford begin rehabilitation, then delivered an anti-inflammatory steroid injection about three weeks before the race. Meanwhile, Crawford saw orthopedic specialist Frank Scott, MD, for help with his shoulder injury. Scott also prescribed rehabilitation and pain-controlling injections.

Crawford ran the Boston Marathon with his arm in a sling and tears in his eyes. Mei-Dan and Scott had done enough to make the pain bearable, but Crawford admits the first five or six miles were a painful challenge.

E. David Crawford and wife Jodi celebrate after finishing the 2014 Boston Marathon last month.
“After that it was mind over matter,” he said. At mile 20, he walked and ran the 0.4-mile ascent near Boston College known as “Heartbreak Hill,” then soldiered on to the end, crossing the finish line in a little over five hours. “Longer than it should have been,” he said.

Wife Jodi also completed the race, giving Crawford an extra measure of satisfaction, but he paid the price for the iron-man effort. After the race, he iced down and says he felt okay, at least at first. “I hurt more than after any of the previous 17 marathons,” he admitted. “A week later, my hip and shoulder were killing me.” Ibuprofen is still a staple of his day, he said as he sat in his office this week.

Crawford has no regrets — and is already planning to get back to training so he can reach his goal of running in 20 Boston Marathons. “I’m a wounded warrior saved by our Orthopedics Department,” he said.

— Tyler Smith