

Readington Runs – A Marathoner is Born

At the time of this writing, it is early April, and I'm getting myself prepared to run my 3rd Boston Marathon on Patriot's Day in New England. By the time this article goes to press, I hopefully will have completed my 48th career marathon, and yet I have no doubt that this one will be unique. They all are!

Lots of things go through one's mind as marathon day approaches after months of hard training and sacrifices – anxiety, apprehension, and self-doubt on how well one has trained are just some of the emotions experienced. I couldn't help but ruminate about my memories of that first attempt at running 26 miles, 385 yards so many years ago, and thinking to myself that I've come a long way in the meantime. In fact, there have been over 54,000 miles of training and racing in the intervening years.

At any rate, below is a recap I wrote some years ago of that first marathon. And yes; that was also the first time I vowed "never again".

In The Beginning

Following high school, where I had been very active in numerous team and individual sports, I developed into a spectator instead of a participant. Lack of regular exercise, getting married to an excellent cook, and smoking 28 cigarettes a day (not 25, not 30) for fifteen years, I had become a non-athlete, a slob, by the time I was 33. A cancer scare in the family that ultimately turned out to be benign had an enormous effect on me. I quit smoking "cold turkey" on Feb. 28th 1982. For some unknown reason, three months later I decided to take up running. Probably it was to prevent any more weight gain; I had already gone from 132 lbs to 169 lbs since high school.

The first night was pathetic. I didn't quite make two blocks. I was gasping, retching, coughing, and wheezing. The second night I made the two blocks. A local track was half a mile from the house. I started driving (!) to the track so that I could start to more accurately measure my progress. Somewhere around the end of the first month I completed one mile. I was in ecstasy and improvement was dramatic over the next few months. My mental state was benefiting as much as my body, I think.

A good friend who was an experienced runner (at this point I had discovered the difference between a jogger and a runner - a jogger is someone slower than you, and a runner is someone faster!) convinced me to try a 20 km or 12.4 mile race that September. I think it wouldn't have been quite so bad if the weather hadn't been 90 degrees with oppressive humidity. The last words the starter said before firing the gun were "it is officially dangerous to run today - go easy". Before the end of that race I had reached a new level of feeling pathetic. I was miserable, but I had finished.

Five months later this "friend" somehow convinced me to run a marathon - the National Capital in Ottawa, Canada. I started to read as much as I could about this ultimate of events, desperately trying to cram what should be years of gradual preparation into a few months of intensive training. My friend again ran with me, and as is the case in most marathons, the first 30 kilometers were relatively easy.

Many years later, I realize just how sadistic the organizers of that race had been. At 20 miles, the course was at the bottom of Parliament Hill. At around 20 miles, the glycogen, or fuel, for most runners, is depleted, and any hill looks like Mt. Everest. I hit the infamous, but very real, "wall" that afflicts all but the most elite marathoners. I had covered the first 20 miles in 2 1/2 hours. It took another 2 hours plus to manipulate the last 6.2 miles. I lost three toenails; I had two broken

bones in my feet; I had hypothermia; and four times I nearly fell into the canal that straddles the last 10 kms. Medics in emergency vehicles and bicycles would periodically question whether I was all right and if I wanted a lift. Well, I was hardly all right, but no way was I going to quit, because I desperately wanted to be able to say I had finished a marathon, and I **knew** I would never, ever, do this again. I finished in 4 hours and 32 minutes. The next day I couldn't walk down stairs unless I took them backwards.

Four months later in Montreal, I ran another marathon - 20 minutes faster. In May 1984, I returned to the scene of the original battle - Ottawa - and conquered that marathon. This time I ran 3:51 and felt on top of the world as I exuberantly covered the last few hundred yards with my wife and children sharing in my triumph. I have run over 40 marathons since, including New York, Paris, and Boston. None were as difficult as that first one, but every one is a challenge, and I never enter one unless I have done adequate preparation, including a number of 20 mile training runs. You can't cheat the marathon.

As I really found out in that first attempt, most marathons are not pleasurable while you are running them, but I keep going back because I really enjoy the planning, the training, the camaraderie, and the excitement before and after. When I finish, I relish the achievement. Sometimes this is immediate; and sometimes this takes a few hours, days, or weeks, and I know that I have done something that not one person in a million can do. I am a marathoner.

For further information on running in Readington and Hunterdon County, contact Bruce Marshall at BGMarshall@earthlink.net.

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