

I tell people that the most important sleep a marathoner can have is the night before the night before the marathon. Still true for me. Last night I pined and rolled about on a sleeper couch that was way beyond its shelf life! No matter I used the waking hours to run the marathon in my mind. I went through it about three times – picturing the scenes from previous years. Yeah, it helps to have run the same race a few times. There should be no surprises. Well, it turned out there were some.

So at 8 am I took my place among the aspirant athletes facing the colors of our flag as they were marched to the start. The organization was flawless and the companions were jovial. The day was fresh and cool. The sky was blue and clear. The crowds were vocal and supportive. I felt strong and healthy and very afraid!!!

What could be wrong? Simply that in my hand was a stick affixed to a huge board promising every Boston Marathon hopeful that I'd get them over the finish line in 3 hours and 45 minutes. For many that was the qualifying time they needed. After all these years of running Hartford the organizers had decided that I would make a good pace leader. Every time a new runner introduced themselves the pressure mounted.

After a young lady belted out the national anthem – sorry that wasn't kindly put. Lets just say that she has an amazingly powerful voice – almost ear-splitting but no endurance for the long notes in the tune – there'd be these strange silences wherever there was a long note - as she sucked in a huge breath for the next volley launched at the captive listeners. Well after that there was a kind and gentle prayer by a local pastor and the air horn set the whole event underway.

I ran over to the side of the avenue to dump the huge sign – because the bright yellow shirt also has the numbers all over its back. From there it was all concentration to run even splits. The first decision is 'do I run at my chip time or at the official race time.' Somehow I had forgotten to ask, so I erred on the side of caution. In any case a constant pace per mile was called for.

What didn't help was that the 3 hrs 40 min pace setter and I were both novices and we knew it about each other. At one point I was a whole minute ahead of the 8Mins 30 sec pace I was supposed to maintain and he got so far behind on his pace that we passed each other!! There was bedlam behind us as the two "busses" of runners realized what was happening. The result was an immediate reduction in confidence in both of us – and rightly so.

I told the worried group around me that we had decided to race each other to the finish. That jest wasn't well received either. Sometimes it is better to have people think you are a fool than to open your big mouth and remove every trace of a doubt! Well the good news is that we soon corrected the pace and assumed our proper relationship to each other.

At about mile 11 a stab in my left thigh reminded me that a small injury I'd picked up in training was still with me. Ironically it happened just as I was reminding a lagging runner that the chairman of our running club maintains that "the pain is compulsory

but the grumbling is optional.” I said not a word about the problem and soldiered on. It never went away but it grew no worse either.

About then a verse from the Old Testament came to mind: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength” ... yeah you know how it goes on: “They shall run and not be weary and walk and not faint.” I did some urgent praying and claimed the verse in the most practical sense possible. Since I wasn’t going to do any walking (that never looks good in a pace runner!) I focused on the first part. Only the most steadfast atheists can convince me that they have never resorted to prayer during the onset of unexpected pain at or near mile 18. I obviously don’t need to be quite that resolute – I prayed for strength not to let down all the “hopefuls” around me.

There were some special lanes where the relay teams could hand over the baton. Once I ran through one of them yelling to the group following me: “I’ve changed my mind!” (Meaning that I’ll just stop there.) Another time during a long out-and-back section there was a beautifully laid out table on the front lawn and the family was just sitting down to breakfast. I called out to them to save me some and that I’d be back soon. On the way back they were surprised to find some runner at their table asking why they hadn’t saved him some!

Long before the reaching of the half marathon mark we passed the front runners heading back towards us. No surprises – a joy to behold them. A finely tuned, glistening and flying group of very East African looking athletes. What was however amazing was that the lead runner was opening a huge gap so early in the marathon. They never caught him. Then came the first lady – also streaking towards us at lightening speed. I heard afterwards that she established a course record. If that’s not true – it would be very close to a record today.

Ah well – after you’ve had a chance to ogle at those sissies out front – y’know the ones who can’t take much sun – you have to buckle down to the grind of getting to mile 20. Around there the group tailing me began to thin out. Each water table I emerged with fewer and fewer of them. Hmm – where can I get a more powerful deodorant for races? I must have been having a very bad effect on my group. No amount of encouraging could keep the bunch with me. They dwindled to just one lady.

This year they set us a new course from mile 19 to the end. Gone is the huge hill at mile 20. We had a lovely run along the river edge. My friend Peter Anderson – the man who introduced me to marathon running in Johannesburg in 1986 – was waiting with a video camera at mile 25. By this time I was hitting the splits to the second. I felt spent but yet mentally energized. It must have been that verse kicking in!

A young lady doing the relay’s 4th leg apologized for passing me so easily. I explained that by then there’s no ego left – even in male runners and she headed for the finish. The next challenge was to go from 26 miles to the end in exactly 3hrs 45 minutes (the race committee will refund your entry fee if you can do it.) I got the clock in sight and a whole new experience dawned for me. My normal style is to see

the time and put every last ounce of energy into the final sprint. How weird to be slowing down at the end and I have to tell you that minute 3:44 took forever! In fact I stopped ten paces short of the finish mat and took exaggeratedly slow steps – raising much laughter. What fun!

So thanks for sharing the journey with me once more. Will I do it again? – As Chairman Bruce of the Hunterdon Hill Runners says: “Marathoners need strong legs and a very poor memory”