

THE MARATHON

Allan M. Winkler

For me, the marathon has always been the ultimate race. Running the 400 meters has turned into a sustained sprint, and that is difficult, to be sure. But the marathon is something else altogether, far more grueling than any race I know, even running 10,000 meters on the track. The notion of running more than 26 miles at a sub 5-minute-per-mile pace – or indeed any pace – is mind-boggling, and something I viewed with profound respect as I began to run daily 35 years ago and logged my own endless miles on the road. Someday I would run a marathon, I told myself, never really expecting it to happen.

I knew the legend of Pheidippides, of course. He was the Greek messenger in 490 B.C. who ran about 25 miles from Marathon to Athens to let his countrymen know about a glorious military victory over the Persians. And then he dropped dead. His death started, or at least fed, the legend that this was an inhuman distance for any mortal man to run.

But with the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, people did run the marathon. That year, on the last day of the Games, Greece had not yet won a medal when 25 men lined up on Marathon Bridge to run to the Olympic Stadium in Athens. And then Spiridon Louis, a Greek postal worker, finished the 24.85-mile course in just under 3 hours, 7 minutes ahead of his closest competitor. People continued to run the marathon in the years that followed; indeed, the next year, 1897, saw the first running of the Boston Marathon. For the 1908 Olympic Games in London, the distance was increased to 26 miles, so that the race could finish in front of the royal box, and 16 years later, in the 1924 Paris Olympics, the current distance of 26.2 miles was run for the first time.

Some of the best runners in the world have run the marathon. Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia won both the 5,000 and the 10,000 in the Olympic Games in 1952 in Helsinki, then ran his first marathon and won the race in Olympic record time. But that was before I was really aware of either Zatopek or the race.

My first memory of a marathon goes back to 1960, when Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia won the Olympic event in Rome, running barefoot on the stones of the Appian Way, breaking Zatopek's record by an astonishing 8 minutes. Never mind that I didn't

know where Ethiopia was. I was fascinated by the sight of this slender African runner gliding along effortlessly (or so it appeared) through the Italian countryside. Four years later, he won again with shoes on, this time in Japan, breaking his own Olympic record by more than 4 minutes, and becoming the only man to win the gold medal in the marathon twice.

But I was even more taken by Frank Shorter's surprise victory in 1972. American runners weren't supposed to win this overpowering distance race, but Shorter did. I remember hearing his progress on car radio, hurrying home to find out if he was able to hold his lead to the bitter end. And he did. It helped that he was a Yale graduate, who had been an adequate but not great runner until he turned to the marathon, while I was a Yale graduate student, just starting to run again, having overcome the assumption that real grown-up men didn't run after competing in high school and college.

And so I began to run longer and longer distances with Frank Shorter on my mind. But even as I got up to 10 miles, and then even further, the marathon seemed beyond reach. As I began my teaching career, I thought I would have to train during a sabbatical, or perhaps a year abroad. For there was no way I could manage to complete the distance without that kind of time to get into real competitive shape.

Then I learned that one of the senior faculty members in my department had begun to run, and had completed the New York Marathon. His time was around three and a half hours – not particularly good to be sure – but he had done it, and he wasn't even much of an athlete. I began to think that maybe I could too. We arranged to run together one Saturday morning, and he told me that he was training for the Jersey Shore Marathon in Asbury Park in a couple of weeks, and was going to run about 15 or 16 miles that day, and so I said, without understanding the implications, "Well, I guess I will too." We ran the full distance comfortably, and all of a sudden, I began to think that maybe I could go 26 miles. After all, it was just another 10.

The following week, I called up my colleague and suggested another run. He had already given me an application, for, in a fit of euphoria at completing 15 miles, I had agreed to run the marathon with him. But his leg had begun to hurt, and he turned to be out of commission both for a Saturday run and for the race itself. Having made the

commitment, I ran 18 miles that day by myself, and felt even better than the preceding week.

And that's how I found myself taking a train to New Jersey, borrowing a car, and driving to Asbury Park by myself for my first marathon. I was eager, and didn't know enough to realize that I was hardly ready. I had a brand-new pair of shoes – Nike Waffle Trainers – developed by University of Oregon track coach Bill Bowerman by pouring a sticky rubber substance into his wife's waffle iron to make shoes for his steeplechasers, and it never crossed my mind that running with shoes that were not sufficiently broken in might not be such a good idea.

The weather on the day of the race was beautiful. The course was flat and easy, with some running on the boardwalk and the rest on country roads. We could see the ocean part of the time, but an earlier wind had died down. I took off at what I presumed was a reasonable pace and ticked off one sub-7-minute mile after another. This was a piece of cake, I thought, as I hit the turnaround point on the out-and-back course in sub-3-hour pace. A few miles later I ran right smack into the proverbial wall. This is when your body has exhausted the glycogen in your cells, and begins to burn muscle tissue itself. And it hurts like hell. Soon I found myself making bargains with myself. Run the distance between 3 telephone poles, and then walk the stretch to the next pole. Meanwhile, big, bloody blisters had begun to form on the balls of both feet. The new Nikes were leaving their mark. But I persevered and limped home in just under 3½ hours, enormously proud of myself for having completed the course.

That should have been enough, but of course it wasn't. Fall gave way to winter, and I didn't run much in the snow. But then a couple of friends told me about a bus going from New Haven to Hopkinton, Massachusetts for the Boston Marathon. In college, my freshman roommate, Walter Hewlett, son of the founder of the now huge printer company, had run the Boston Marathon with Erich Segal, the young faculty member who had not yet made his mark with *Love Story* but was a pretty decent runner, in addition to being an outstanding classicist. Walter had come in under 2 hours and 45 minutes, and had felt pretty good about his race. Launching once more into the world of dreams, I began to believe I could do better than I had done before. And so I trained even harder. I took long runs, at least one of about 20 miles. I did speedwork. And, in an

intramural cross-country race just 4 or 5 days before the race, I hurt my knee, such that I could barely walk on it. I spent the weekend wolfing down aspirin every 2 or 3 hours, massaging my knee with ice, and hoping it would heal fast. On the Monday morning of Patriot's Day, the traditional day for the race in Massachusetts, I got out of bed without it hurting, and climbed on the bus for the race.

I hadn't officially qualified to enter the race, but I tucked myself into the back of the pack, and no one pulled me off the road. And, though I may just be rationalizing my actions for my own ends, I don't think anyone minded.

Much to my relief, I ran the entire race without feeling my knee at all. Nor did I stop, not even once, as I had in the Jersey Shore Marathon. Heartbreak Hill – that infamous stretch between 18 and 22 miles in the Newton area – was excruciatingly painful, but I made it all the way to the Prudential Center in just over 3 hours and 15 minutes. After that, I couldn't walk, and was still hobbling around several weeks later. But I had the race under my belt, and had released enough endorphins to keep me happy for a long time to come.

Then came the elusive quest for the holy grail of marginally-decent distance runners – a sub-3-hour marathon. I moved to Oregon in 1979, trained with a group of friends over the noon hour every day, and went up to Portland one gorgeous, crisp November day to run a marathon there. Running by myself – as I had in each case before – I found myself loping along next to Gordon Haller, a taxi driver who had won the first Iron Man Triathlon in Hawaii the year before, swimming about 2½ miles, biking more than 110, and then running a full marathon. He was out for a sub-3-hour training run, trying to help his brother break the magic mark, and we stayed together for the middle half of the race until he pulled ahead and I encountered the dastardly “wall” once again. But I finished in 3:05, in what seemed to me to have taken far less effort than before.

And so I tried again the next year. This time I was even better trained. I had run 60 miles a week throughout the summer, sometimes getting up to 80. I had run a half-marathon in 1:24 – one hour and 24 minutes – and a 30 kilometer race almost as fast. I had done workouts that make me tired just thinking about them. But, alas, the weather refused to cooperate. This time I faced torrential rain that left my shoes waterlogged – and heavy – after the first mile. A fierce headwind in the last 6 miles did me in. Adding

insult to injury, I was running with Margaret Hacker, a woman in our training group, and all spectators were on her side. “Go, lady,” they cried. “You can beat that bum!” She went on to win the women’s division in just a bit over 3 hours. I came in at 3:04, my personal record, but not the time I wanted.

I never again came that close. I tried on several other occasions, but each time something went wrong. I could run 3:06 or 3:07 at will, but could never manage to do much better than that. Eventually, I bowed to reality and decided that this was just one more of life’s small disappointments and tried to move on.

But I still watch a marathon – or a triathlon – with a feeling of longing and a sense of what might have been. In my 3rd year in Ohio, I went up to Dayton and ran a half-marathon there in respectable time, and briefly entertained the thought of trying the full distance once again before thinking better of it. Just this year, I watched a half-marathon in my home town, and felt pangs of nostalgia once again, though they passed when I remembered that I was now running 9-minute, rather than sub-7-minute miles, and so a decent time was not even remotely possible. And, I consoled myself, there was no reason to run another long race, as much as running remains a necessary part of my life. I had nothing more I needed to prove. I didn’t have to run another phenomenally long race. After all, I’d been there, done that.