

Boston – Thirty to Sixty?

By

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For as long as I can remember I have been an athlete – not that I knew what the word meant when I began playing baseball with the neighbor kids at age three. Nor did the American system of competitive sports teach me much about what it means to be an athlete. I did become a more or less skilled practitioner of baseball, basketball, track, weightlifting, and enjoyed some success as a football player through my first year of college. But while all of these sports required athleticism, they did not teach anything more than transitory skills, which our society rewarded with praise and even scholarships while I was young; but with the expectation that they would be outgrown and abandoned after college. I only truly learned what it means to be an athlete when I took up distance running at the age of twenty-seven.

I was a pretty unlikely runner. I had remained athletic, it is true, by continuing to lift weights and play pick up basketball between long bouts of studying while in graduate school. But I had been a sprinter in high school, and throughout my football career I had concentrated on generating the bursts of speed that mattered to football scouts, which rarely exceeded forty yards. Then there was the penitential side of running. Invariably in my sports career, running was used to punish players for some sin committed on court or field. “Take a lap” was one of those dreaded coach’s expletives, even worse than being called a turd or something more Cheney-esque.

What brought me to running was a vague dissatisfaction with my athletic aimlessness since giving up football, amplified by a desire to balance the purely intellectual challenge of writing a Ph.D. dissertation with something physical. A fellow graduate student had taken up running the year before, in his case to head off a family

tendency towards high blood pressure, and upon his advice I bought shoes and began to train. I was fortunate to be living in the northern suburbs of Chicago, within a mile or so of the Green Bay trail, which ran for miles parallel to the Chicago and Northwestern tracks. Flat topography and a traffic-free path imposed a discipline on my running: each day I went a bit further than the previous, and with the multiplier effect of an out-and-back course I was soon covering appreciable distances.

I don't know when the idea of entering a marathon first occurred to me. Now with the benefit of considerable experience, I would have advised that younger me to forget about it until I had several years of distance running under my belt. That 1981 self, however, thought three months were ample preparation, and so I entered my first Chicago marathon. To be fair, I had stretched my long training runs past the twenty mile mark at eight minute per mile pace; I had shed twenty pounds of body weight making me a lean one fifty-five, and I'd learned to run in the heat of summertime Chicago. Last but not least, I had the approval of my self-deputized coach – that fellow graduate student I mentioned a moment ago -- who, though almost as great a running neophyte as I, assured me I was fit enough and that he would watch and encourage me every step of the way. *Nota Bene*, he did not volunteer to join me.

Marathoning in America was in full bloom when I toed the starting line that September with about five thousand other entrants. It was less than a decade since Frank Shorter had begun the all-too brief age of American dominance of distance running, and average Americans like me were taking up the challenge in record numbers. The day was rather warm and breezy, and I remember joining a sea of bobbing heads that stretched out as far as I could see ahead of me. I managed to hold to something a bit over eight minute pace for mile after mile, to the considerable delight of my “coach” and relief of my wife. Then, at mile 22, my legs simply stopped working. I was more than four miles from the finish and I had exhausted the glycogen – muscle fuel – in my legs – I had “hit the wall.” Quitting at that point, however, was simply out of the question, so I walked and jogged with head down into a considerable Chicago wind, until I crossed the finish line in something over four hours. My last memory of that day was the mistake of partaking

rather too freely of the race sponsor's product – Dannon yoghurt – with savage gastro-intestinal results.

Strangely enough, this experience confirmed me as a marathoner to such an extent that I trained hard through a Chicago winter and entered the first Spring marathon I could. This was the rather unique Lake County marathon, which began at Ravinia park with a train ride 26 miles north, and a return run to Ravinia. With one marathon's experience, I ran much more successfully, finishing easily in slightly over three and a half hours. That turned out to be my last marathon until 1989.

In the meantime, much to my own surprise, I had become a much better runner. Moving to Stanford in 1982 landed me among a group of dedicated noonday runners, who met at Angel Field, the old track and field stadium, and who called themselves the Angel Field Ancients. Despite the name, there were some fine runners in the group, particularly Glenn who had run at Oxford and was still capable of running a mile around 4 minutes flat. As a group we ran both hills and on the track, in workouts runners call speed work. This combination is essential, I learned, to increasing one's speed over every distance from the mile to the marathon, because there is no better way to build both your strength and running efficiency. By the end of my two years at Stanford, I had developed into a pretty fair distance runner, who for the first time had thoughts of being able to qualify for the Boston marathon and its challenging standard of two hours fifty minutes or better. But a new job in Cincinnati, and its demands to teach and write put those plans on hold. Thus there was no Boston for me at thirty.

In 1988, with a book manuscript nearly complete and four years of teaching experience behind me, I was ready to begin serious running again. I did not have to look very far, because UC also had a group of noonday runners – a bit smaller but just as eclectic as the Ancients – and much more dedicated to running marathons. The group's coach and guru at the time was Tom Grogan, who counted Julie Isphording and Mark Helgesen among the runners he coached – Julie of course made the 1984 Olympic team in the marathon, and Helgesen finished 3rd in the 1976 Boston Marathon. Grogan's

philosophy was and is based on high training mileage, with interspersed speed work, tempo and hill running. This approach was much more systematic and challenging than what I had done before, and I found the company of other committed marathoners to be tremendous encouragement. Within a year of running sometimes as many as a hundred miles a week, entering races of shorter distances, all the while pointing for the marathon, I ran my personal best time of 2:45. But about the only thing I remember about that Columbus marathon is being passed by the eventual women's winner with four miles to go.

Training at that level of intensity is nearly impossible to sustain for very long: family, work, and physical breakdown usually intervene at some point. For me it was the birth of my son in 1991 and a bout of back trouble in 1992. By the time my fortieth birthday was approaching I felt once again the lure of the Boston marathon, but I was no longer in the kind of shape that gave confidence of qualifying. For running Boston really means running both a qualifying time at an earlier marathon, as well as the Patriot's day event from Hopkinton to Copley Square. A further complication was the fact that I'd be in Belgium for the six months preceding Boston, so I'd have to run a qualifying marathon in Europe, in a time of three hours ten minutes or better.

After a hard summer of training in 1993 I entered the Brussels marathon in order to qualify for Boston. One of the great things about Belgium is that the weather is perfect for distance running year round, and that September day was no exception. About 3,000 of us began at the gate of the Cinquantenaire, ran down the rue de la Loi (or Wetstraat) and ran east to complete a 42 kilometer circle around the city finishing where we had begun. I remember the shouts of encouragement from the onlookers – “Courage” “Courage” – and the relief I felt when I finished in a little over three hours. I was Boston bound.

The following six months found me spending a great deal of time working in libraries and archives, with little time left for running. To make matters worse, that winter was one of the wettest on record, which in that country means being wet all the

time rather than just some of the time. What saved my marathon, it turned out, was my daily bicycle commute to Bruges, which often involved two ten-mile round trips of energetic pedaling on a rusty, ancient behemoth of a bike. When I arrived back in Cincinnati, I had a month to prepare for my first Boston marathon. Needless to say I was not really in shape to run when April 18th came around.

But run I did, and I had the time of my life. There is simply nothing like the experience of that marathon: the early morning bus ride out to Hopkinton; the hours spent lounging at the Hopkinton High School awaiting the noon start, and then the rare point-to-point course back to Boston, with every square foot on both sides lined with shouting marathon fans. You never forget the screaming Wellesley women at half way; or the series of hills between miles 17 and 22 known as Heartbreak, or the sight of the giant Citgo sign at mile 23, that never seems to get closer. But stupendous can only describe the feeling of turning the last corner and heading toward the finish line with literally tens of thousands of people cheering you on, even if you are just a middle-of-the packer as I was that day. And then reality descends: the Boston course is extremely hard on the legs because of its changes in elevation, and the punishment was far worse on under-trained legs like mine. I remember an excruciating descent to the Copley square T-station followed by a long ride out to my hotel, which required a half mile walk from the station to reach. I was such a pathetic spectacle that a driver stopped and insisted on giving me a ride. That was my Boston at forty.

The next nine years passed with only two marathons run – one in Columbus and one in Chicago – neither was inspiring. Yet I never doubted I'd take on the challenge of qualifying and running Boston when I turned fifty. This time the challenge was overcoming a series of personal crises, which meant I arrived at the Chicago marathon in October, 2003 emotionally frayed and slightly under-trained. I thought the qualifying standard I had to make was three hours thirty minutes, but I was determined to just run how I felt. That turned out to be three hours thirty four minutes, which I accepted with disappointment but with the knowledge that I had run the best I could. It was only the

next day that I discovered I had been mistaken: the qualifying time for age fifty was 3:35 – I had qualified by sixteen seconds.

I wish I could say that my life improved over the ensuing six months, but at least my training did, as it became my solace during tough times. Memories of Boston dragged me out of bed on cold, dark mornings, and I marked time by the lengthening of the days and the signs of Spring that appeared on my favorite long running route through Spring Grove cemetery. I also wish I could say that my return to Boston was easy; but the 2004 Boston marathon was the third hottest in history – 86 degrees and humid in Hopkinton at the start, even hotter at the finish. The 1976 marathon was hotter still, but then there were only 1900 runners – 19,000 started last April.

By late that afternoon, nearly 1000 runners were being treated in Boston area hospitals for dehydration and heat stroke; fortunately I was not among them, mostly because my good friend, Ali Houshmand, and I had decided to run at precisely eight minute per mile pace, taking in all the water we could possibly consume and pour over our heads. The microchip that marathoners are now issued marked the success of our strategy, as we clicked off mile after mile at our target pace, as we watched hundreds of runners succumb to the heat. There is simply nothing more dangerous than marathoning in hot weather, and I did not feel confident of finishing until I saw that Citgo sign and realized I had plenty left. Second only to the cheers at the finish of Boston is the exhilaration that comes with passing lots of people on your way to the finish line. This, my Boston at fifty, found me accelerating to the finish line in a time of three hours and thirty one minutes. I have never been so proud of an athletic accomplishment.

I fully intend that there be a “Boston at sixty” for me, although it is already clear that my times are slower, recovery longer, and likelihood of injury greater than in years past. On the other hand, the wisdom conferred by long experience and thousands of miles no doubt saved me at Boston 2004 from running too fast and finding a hospital bed instead of the finish line. To be an athlete at any age, it strikes me, requires the

summoning of reason, will, and experience to overcoming one's physical limitations. But there's something else as well that compels me; something less easily put into words. A young Marine corporal in Fallujah captured it perfectly when he said. "I'm not going to be one of those people who gets old and says, 'I wish I had done this. I wish I had done that.' Every once in a while, you've got to do something hard, do something you're not comfortable with. A person needs a gut check."