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Subject: Runner's remorse

Marathon runs

I recently updated a short single-sheet biography for a speech I'm giving next week to the Columbia East Rotary Club at the Fairgrounds. There's the usual disclosure: education, professional accomplishments, civic activism, and fun stuff, such as travel, tennis and marathons.

I don't look like I finished a marathon lately. And I say as much by citing the 1997 London Marathon as my last and slowest. What have I run lately? Nothing in that class, or in any class for that matter. Marathons, tough grinds they may be, can be a lot of fun, particularly the world's largest like New York and London . The New York City Marathon has more than 50,000 finishers. When New York staged its first marathon as four laps around Central Park in the summer of 1970, they had only 55 finishers.

For the July 4 weekend in 1976, the summer of the Bicentennial, I had my number to run New York. The marathoners were set to run through all five boroughs for the first time in the history of the city. That same weekend the Tall Ships were on display in New York Harbor. I was tending bar in Houston at the time, but I was depending on a fellow bartender to cover for me that weekend. At the last minute he fell through, and I had to stay on the job to keep my job for the rest of the summer.

The next summer, 1977, I was working for Alan Taniguchi FAIA, the former dean at the University of Texas School of Architecture, a great architect but more importantly in this instance, a great guy. He encouraged me to try for the NYC Marathon again, this time the first Sunday in November, and to leave on Friday and return on Monday, missing both days at work.

Still considered a novel idea suitable for eccentric distance runners, the 1977 NYC Marathon probably had no more than a few thousand finishers. I can't remember but I can say with full authority I had a grand time. When you go to a big-city marathon, you not only get the race, you get the big city and its opera and world-class dining and all that.

With that kind of fun, I came back to run it again in 1979, and then I maintained the distance running habit, but I didn't run a marathon again until the summer of 1988, which was the Grandfather Mountain Marathon. I got

through Grandfather all right, but the continuous climb makes it the “toughest marathon in America,” as the T-shirt says.

When Atlanta's marathon began about the same time as NYC's, it started and ended at Westminster, a prep school. For the duration of the race, for every hill up you got a hill down, and when you finished you were at the same elevation when you started. Fair enough and not so grueling. In the Grandfather Mountain Marathon, however, for every hill up after the start in Boone, you got another hill up, and so it went all the way to the top of Grandfather Mountain.

Toughened up by Grandfather, I ran Charlotte in January 1989. The problem with Charlotte was my own misunderstanding of the start times, one for the fun run and another for the marathon. My lady friend, my driver, agreed with me we needed to be at the start line at 9:45, which meant we should pull into downtown Charlotte no later than 9:15, leaving me time enough to tighten my shoe laces and stretch a little. We misled ourselves, and we didn't get good information until we finally opened the information packet as we approached Charlotte around 9:00 that morning. Each of us thought the other had read the information packet. The good information included the marathon start time at 9:00 a. m.

We approached a race official at his table to explain our plight and my corrective action. I said I shouldn't take off a few minutes late. I should wait to leave with the fun run crowd at their start time of 9:45, 45 minutes after the beginning of the marathon but also at an official and witnessed time. In other words, I would take off at 9:45, but I would run the full 26.2 miles and return to my race official's table to confirm my time.

It turned out to be at my advantage. After maybe 12 miles I was passing people, the overweight and underprepared types struggling to keep up. I was running with the attitude I should pass the people I came in behind because they had all been on the route 45 minutes longer than I. How could I not be faster?

I finished, for me, in record time, 3:31, as reported by The Charlotte Observer, which also reported comparable times by Columbians Francis Burriss, a high school buddy who became a minister, and Mack Whittle, banker.

Not looking for another personal best, I showed up for the Washington Marathon, a.k.a. the Marine Corps Marathon, in the fall of 1994, when Oprah told her millions of viewers she was running. For someone pleasantly plump, she looked in pretty good shape, like she had followed a running regimen for at least the previous six months. I ran a few feet behind Oprah the whole way, all of 4:30. The crowd cheered Oprah onward, and I benefitted from 26.2 miles of enthusiastic encouragement. We shook hands at the finish under the Marine Corps Monument (Iwo Jima). Her time wasn't bad, but it was fine with me because it gave me a slow pace to enjoy the jog.

In marathon finishes, you want to target 3:30 because that's still running. Slower than 3:30 is jogging. Slower than 5:00 is walking, practically.

My last marathon, London in 1997, was when my travel companion met me just beyond my 4:30 finish and handed me my clean khakis, fresh shirt and loafers to change into for our train ride to Broadway in the Cotswolds, home of the Lygon Arms. I disappeared into the lobby men's room of the National Portrait Gallery behind the National Gallery.

I threw away my running shorts and my briefs and my smelly socks and sweaty shirt in the men's room trash can, and I bathed somehow in the sink. Cleaned clothes and shined shoes - but no socks, traditionalist I was still - I surfaced from the men's room ready to hail a hack to take us to Paddington Station.

Presentable again, I explained to my companion what happened at about mile 13 and why I really appreciated her carrying clean clothes for me. At about the halfway point I found myself in the hunt for a port-a-john. Marathons have these things every couple miles or so, and since I tend to run in the middle of the pack, in a marathon of 30,000 runners I should imagine maybe 15,000 pass the same halfway point as I with another 15,000 to follow. Walk into a port-a-john after 15,000 runners have already come by and you'll find plenty of evidence of the passing parade, to include a complete exhaustion of paper on the roll. I still had my 20-pound bill. Any idea what that was worth in 1997? Expensive hygiene.