

Sunday Coffee – Boston Musings

In May 2010, a thousand-year flood followed a lazy, fat rain cloud and his friends, dumping so much precipitation that at the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, a town along their shared bank became flooded. The flood damaged not just the immediate old downtown; the heavy waterflow kept moving inland, further than in anyone's memory.

From that natural disaster arose an idea to demonstrate the strength of resolve in that riverside town. Mother's Day weekend 2011, the IronMom half-marathon was introduced and run for the first time. Whomever designed the course serendipitously produced an almost perfect half marathon course:

two straight miles running along a flat divided street replete with Victorian homes and mature leafed trees, followed by a long gentle curve into the two miles of a pleasant, quiet neighborhood blending into another before the solitary major hill late in mile four on the course leading into a high-end neighborhood that goes slightly up and slightly down before a fast downhill at mile six taking the course along and across a major highway into a heavily shaded greenway on crushed gravel before going over a pedestrian bridge leading into a meandering route through an adjoining park to reach the 10-mile mark, and then crossing into another neighborhood, a roundabout, and a final two-mile stretch to the finish along the river confluence.

If IronMom is run on a single-digit day in May, the course is fast. There is a better than not chance the humidity will be quiet, building its strength for June.

In July 2021, I flew out on a business trip, checked into my hotel, picked up my race packet, dined outside, awoke at 4 a.m., found my way to the race start, finished, and flew back home. My business was to qualify for Boston. I did.

In November 2021, my time was accepted into the 2022 running of the 126th Boston Marathon. This will be my, let me count my fingers and toes, seventh time racing Boston. Now that I'm 63, I don't take this one for granted.

As is my wont, the day acceptances were announced, I plotted out my training schedule to April 18, 2022. I had long runs, medium runs, long hill repeats (both up and down), tempo runs disguised as 400meter and 800meter repeats, and a few other tidbits unique to me, all on a three-week cycle. Six cycles, each one with a 3+ hour run, a 2:30 run, and a race. I'd been mentally mapping out such a plan since my last Boston in 2019, before Covid Era hit.

The long runs were the same, once every three weeks, a 2.5-mile run followed by 15 miles of walk .05 miles and run the rest, followed by a 2.5 mile finish. Each time I ran along a greenway from one trailhead, moving along the meandering trailhead to another trailhead. One run was flooded, another was iced over, still a third was hampered with strong, freezing wind and sleet. This is the Mid-South we are discussing, here. The other times, the greenway was dry, the air was still and cold, and the consistent pace picked up naturally.

The once each week workouts were consistent, too. Each one was 10 miles in total. My favorite was running the repeat hills on a long, sweeping hill, shaded on both sides: .5 mile up, recover 1:00, run down, recover 1:00. Started with three and got to six, dropped back down to four over those six weeks. The incline was sufficiently steep to produce power on the way up and garner economy on the way down.

Then there were the 10(400/250) repeats run at half marathon pace and a quick jog recovery. At the end, I had myself a 4-mile tempo run at marathon pace. The same for the 8(800/400) repeats, always the week after the 400's. There I had a 6-mile tempo run at marathon pace. Of course, the fact that those workouts were tempo runs didn't really occur to me until the second cycle around when I peered into the weeds of the workout, coming away with the realization that I had lucked out in my training plan.

At my first Boston, I came into it with a knee injury and took the sag bus at mile 10.7. I vowed I would finish my next one, which I did a couple of years later, vomiting at the Commons. My next two Boston's I finished well enough to enjoy the experiences, no sickness and no regrets, except for maybe not fully grasping running fast downhill in the first four miles won't make you fast in the last four. Regardless, I qualified and raced Boston, never tiring of the experiences.

I'm a runner born of the era Frank Shorter winning the Olympic Marathon in Munich, Bill Rodgers barely touching the ground on his way to multiple wins at Boston and New York, Joan Benoit Samuelson being the epitome of grace under pressure. When I quit playing baseball, I laced up my Asics Tigers with the orange soles and headed out the door into the wet, blustery Seattle day. I was hooked. In my 20's and 30's, I raced as if my race results meant something. Of course, they did, but time's passing would allow me to realize that the races, the training, the learning, and being part of running tribes all meant I was alive and living.

The Boston Marathon was always part of the fabric of my running, lurking in the back of mind, casually mentioned on a long run with the other running kids, proudly acknowledged when one of us qualified. Running Boston's course is not why we

make the effort. So many people run, which is a good thing. So many make the qualification effort. For those that qualify, they become part of a now 126-year old tradition of running along what were once New England country roads, through blue-collar and upper-crust neighborhoods, into the urban fare that is Boston, all the while pulled along by hundreds of thousands of spectators who grew up appreciating, and are raising children to appreciate, the spectacle of the race.

The best example personal to my experiences was 2019:

six years following the bombing (that's all that is needed to clue someone into the event, just say the Boston bombing), I had somehow found my way from Hopkinton to Boylston on a miserable racing day for me. I was much sicker than I realized but I also realized I could be to the finish faster if I ran than if I quit. I finished, walked to the buses, retrieved my dry belongings and found a clean port-a-potty amidst a long line of port-a-potties in which to change (By the time I came out, my stand alone stall was the only one remaining of hundreds).

My wife gathered me up and we got onto the T to head back to our stay along the wharf in the North End, switching lines along the way. Standing the entire time because my body hurt when sitting, no less than four times and it might have been more, the best of Boston's gruff, rough, extroverted men asked me if I ran the race and if I finished. Upon my responding with yes each time, I received a bear hug and a thank you. Sitting here now, I tear up over that memory because the reactions were so unexpected and yet, I knew my running Boston made me Boston Strong in their eyes as well as mine.

I am a proud member of the many who braved the winter to show up on a starting line where on a few may run in any given year. I trained for the moment that will last a few hours on that day but will remain in the minds of those who know me. Regardless of how we each finish our Boston; we won't win and we won't be last. Immediately after crossing the finish line on Boylston walking to gather our bags from the buses so that we can be dry and get out of the marathon day weather, we'll begin the internal debriefing runners do after a race, or a run, or a day without running. It comes with the sport.

But don't let that fool you: there is always a not so secret plan, whether I run fast to finish in the middle of the pack or poke along to finish. No one but me will care about my Boston finish. I'll say and hear excellent work to those who know and ran. And that will be wonderfully shared moments. But it won't end there.

This year, there's Paducah.