

Fine Lines

Three and two was the ball-strike count, my having just fouled off another inside curve. Bottom of the seventh and final inning, the bases loaded with two outs. I was looking for a pitch I could pull down the rightfield line that would bring in the lead runner from third for us to win the game. Having already fouled off the prior two pitches from a pitcher who had our team number the first six innings, my at bat that followed a hit batter, a walk, and an infield error load the bases was our last good chance to end this game.

Ignoring the stinging sensation throughout my body, settling into my batting stance, focusing my head on the tall, lanky pitcher just 60 feet, 6 inches away, I fought off the weakness developing in my arms and legs. Nothing but nerves. My stomach knotting up, eyes blinking, I could feel my hands tightly gripping my bat. Same feelings, every at bat since I was five. I knew I wasn't afraid of the pitcher; I'd long since passed that age when I was afraid of being hit by a pitch. Despite my statistics to the contrary, I knew I'd get a hit every at bat. Foolish me. I was very much afraid of failing, letting my team, my friends, and myself down. Fear of failure drove my at bats. I needed to change my self-narrative.

"Time!" I demanded from the umpire, my back left arm reaching towards the umpire, my eyes fixed on the pitcher. "Time," the umpire bellowed as he simultaneously stepped out from behind the catcher. Every player on the field and in the dugout momentarily relaxed. Those few spectators relaxed their vigilance, resuming their conversations. I stepped out of the box, recounting the pitches I'd seen all game. My fourth time up as the leadoff hitter, I'd seen mostly outside fastballs, with a few inside curves, and a showing of change up pitches. One strike out, one walk, one line-drive ground out, led to right now.

I didn't need to take a deep breath. That would have shown weakness. Refusing myself the moment to look towards the pitching mound, imperceptibly and continuously flexed and relaxed my hands grasped around my bat while silently mouthing my mantra, "relax and focus", I stepped back into the lefthanded batter's box, dropped the bat head towards the grass before raising it to just below and even with my left armpit. During this time up, I'd fouled the first two pitches, took two very low and outside balls, slammed a foul, took a high pitch, fouled off two inside curveballs. "You gonna through that change up?" I asked internally. "No, your gonna

bring what you got left. It's gonna be high, again." He went into his full wind up, the runners each took off for the next base, and I tightened and relaxed on last time. I was ready for the pitch.

Almost five decades later, I am now afraid only of failure when I race a marathon in my latest attempt to run a Boston qualifier. I've been going at these attempts all that time, not earning my first three BQ's until my tenth, twelfth, and sixteenth years of running, followed by a long 22-year draught beginning my next four qualifying races. In between were abject failures. Some of my over 50 marathons resulted in missing the needed qualifying time by just over a minute. Others . . . were not so close. It sucks to fail.

There have been so many marathons, that even after I traced back to more than the 50 completed, I chose not to continue to keep track. Some marathons in some cities, I've run more than once. Some were one and done. Honolulu, Dallas, San Francisco, Twin Cities, Seattle, Tucson, Sacramento, Huntsville, York, Tahoe, Seaside, Fleetwood, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Chicago, San Diego, Holland, Indianapolis, Greenbriar, Scranton, Humboldt, Canton, Traverse City, and Massachusetts. Feels like Johnny Cash should sing these cities in a song.

I've passed through the age-group time standards: the sub-2:50 (once); the sub-3:00 (twice); the sub-3:10 (once); passed over the standards until I needed a sub-3:30 (none); sub-3:40 (none); sub-3:50 (twice); sub-3:55 (twice). Now I face needing a sub-4:00.

And, while I will say that failure is not an option, failure is always an option. Trust me on that. Running so close to the time standard that I could taste the chowder in the Back Bay didn't get me there. But wishing a finishing time under the limit required is not helpful, either. I've DNF'd three times: once because the Seattle rain was drowning me; another time when the late autumn Sacramento heat melted my shoes; and a third time where my glutes and ankles gave out in Huntsville. Almost every marathon I started, I finished because the course was out and back or one big loop.

My favorite FTBQ (fail to qualify for Boston) was my first California International Marathon that runs from the horse estates of Folsom to the State Capital, before there were timing chips, smart watches, or tens of thousands. Not until just minutes

before the start of the race did my body wake up and a porta let came available. While inside the one I chose, I heard the starter's gun go off. I reached the start line five minutes after the rest of the racers had left the corral. Looking up at the starter still perched in his stand, I asked, "which way did they go, for I am their leader." The starter caught the flavor of the moment, responding with, "they went that-a-way Kemosabe." I replied kindly. "hi ho Silver, away!" Needing 2:50 plus a minute to BQ, over 26.2 miles I progressively passed the slower runners, then the middling runners, followed by the faster runners, until I reached the slower of the fastest runners. I knew I was going to be short of my goal, but take away the five minutes lost before reaching the starting line, I still ran 2:48. I know it and my watch knows it. The BAA never found out. That will always be a great story.

Through each of those BQ attempts - every single one of my marathons have been a BQ attempt – other than the constant of the marathon training block, the other fixed point is my hyper focusing over the last two weeks leading into the marathon itself. Now a well-practiced art form, I pull out my running logs, searching for comparisons in training results, clues to how great should be my expectation. I begin overanalyzing the weather, girding myself for any possible wind, heat, humidity, heavy rains, or pestilence that could even remotely adversely affect my race. and, if the marathon is the reason for a road trip, I overpack my race kit, covering any potential eventuality. Though I am annoyed with myself that I do this each and every marathon, this practiced obsessiveness is a well-rehearsed source of comfort. My brain moves much too fast for me to simply allow the race to just happen.

My challenge is taking up marathoning in what I term the Frank Shorter era. Not his fault; it's all mine. He won the gold medal in Munich when I was just starting high school. The gold medal was stolen from him in Montreal four years later when I stopped playing collegiate baseball. I discovered a hardcore band of recreational runners who raced hard every time they passed the start line and trained harder. I also discovered that most of these recreational runners trained solo, only running with those runners they knew at the local races. And though I knew about the Boston Marathon, these runners spoke of training for it. At the same time, with the help of network television, we could all watch Boston every April.

In racing through graduate school and into the first decade of my career, in every race, I was fourth, either overall or in my age division. I was consistently so close I could taste it. That pretty much describes my marathons. My racing results also led

me to comparing my marathon results to dating. While I was into qualifying for Boston, it really wasn't into me. I could talk myself into believing I would run a BQ, but it just wasn't going to happen.

And then it did. When I least expected it. Much like how I met my wife.

6:29 a mile for 26.2 miles for almost all runners is not a pace given to all runners. Though I could fly like the wind around the bases, two hours and fifty minutes was hard. Really hard. I know, I tried for a decade, finishing within two minutes on the slow side of that time. Until I trained in my new town. with my new job, by myself, driving myself to the marathon eight hours away, staying in an armpit hotel, eating cheap food, with a small thought of success.

The weather was colder than I anticipated. I raced gloveless, my fingers suffering for the first half of the race, wherein I hit 1:25:10. I was in tight pack, all older, each clearly veterans in marathoning. Letting out an inner thought of surprise, they each outwardly expressed support for my BQ goal, tacitly placing me in the rear of the group, giving me the slipstream. I don't recall any part of that second half, other than seeing the finish line clock read 2:48:33 when I passed it. This time, my time matched the race results. High fives, hugs, excited exclamations, "well done" were passed all around.

Leaving the cheap hotel, showered and somewhat clean, I headed home, stopping only once, at a rest stop along the interstate. I looked around at the mostly deserted parking area, got out of my car, clenched my fists, and let forth a primal scream of absolute joy. An awesome moment. That also started a personal tradition performed after each of my BQ marathons. A very nice tradition, indeed. Failure may suck. Failure doesn't stop the sun from rising the next day. Failure is living. Embrace it. Failure leads to success if you let it. That's the hard part.

I saw the ball in the pitcher's hand before it came out of his glove. He held it loosely. Fastball. His pitching motion was slightly off, putting all he had into that pitch. Fastball. His elbow dropped below parallel with his shoulder. High fastball. Shifting my feet in the batter's box before the high fastball arrived, beginning my jog down to first base from the walk caused by his high fastball, I heard the umpire quietly say, "ball four, take your base, ballgame."