

“It’s basically a way to fight my battle against chronology. I intend to live forever or die trying.”

- Henry Kozlowski, before running his 46th Chicago Marathon

He came to Boston with his wife and their daughter. They came the Thursday of Boston Marathon weekend, staying through Tuesday. So much of that weekend to see, hear, feel, and touch. His wildest dreams of actually qualifying to run Boston had been fulfilled. This was his moment. He knew there would not be another opportunity again.

Post-Covid, he trained to run a marathon in a southern Atlantic coastal town as part of a long-planned family vacation. He surprised himself, running under the time he needed for a Boston Qualifier. Though he poo-pooed his finishing time as not being far enough under the BQ time needed for his age, he registered. Then, he aged into the next older age group. His registration was accepted. He cried tears of joy.

His small entourage didn’t stay in the same Cambridge hotel as the rest of us that streamed in on Friday and Saturday. His was an intimate celebration. We did see them about Boston. It is a small town marathon weekend. We saw them coming out of a restaurant as we were going in. We saw them coming out of the marathon expo laden with bags full of running schtuff as we were going in. They were coming out of the Sam Adams bar as we were going in. Same for the Faneuil Hall, the North Church, the Commons, and yes, Cheers (eye-roll here).

We were walking out of the early service at the Old South Church on Boylston and they were walking in for the next one. I told him of the perfect Italian restaurant in the North End, the bakery in the hole in the wall near the JFK Library T stop, taking the T to the western end, just a half-mile down from the 17th-mile turn at the fire station beginning the heartbreak hill portion of the race. As I later learned from him, they did all that and more. They took photo in front of the harbors, along the Charles, in the Granary Burying Ground, the Commons, and yes, in front of Cheers. It was their week in Boston to always be cherished.

In my plan of avoiding hanging out at the start-line area, I chose to snag a later bus at the Public Garden, walking past him while he waited in line. I joined him, each of us

holding our Dunkin' coffee cups. We sat together for the ride out. 26 miles on a bus is a long sit.

Confiding in me that he was surprised he had qualified, he opined that he probably would never qualify again, given how his marathon times always seemed to miss the BQ standard for his age. I merely nodded, inwardly smug. This was now my seventh rodeo and I planned to run a few more into my 70's, which seemed so far away.

Peppering me with questions about the race, the course, the crowds, the downhills, the Wellesley scream tunnel, the fire station turn, whether heartbreak hill was one long hill or several hills together, how steep was the downhill into town, where were the Boston College students, what was it like to turn right on Hereford, left on Boyleston, we spent the bus ride with me answering those questions and offering more. If you know, you know. If you haven't raced Boston, ask someone who has.

Arriving in Hopkinton, suggesting he follow me, we meandered onto the pre-race gathering area, chocked full of marathoners waiting the call to the wave start. I demonstrated by my practiced means of locating a spot to call our own while we waited for our time to head to the start line, relaxing in more shared storytelling. When our corral was called to begin the long stroll to the start, showing him the last potty stop before the crowded start line, I reminded him to have a good time, go slow down the first steeply downhill first mile, and remember that he was not going to finish last.

Great was his Boston Marathon experience. He slapped every kid's outstretched hand, shared stories with those around him throughout the race. Some stories he repeated because he found himself among new lifelong friends almost every other mile. He tossed away worry about his finishing time, crowd-surfed the BC undergrads, coming out with a full can of beer, thanked every person in uniform, be it city, county, state, or federal. Finishing, he spotted and cheered with his running tribe who had started ahead of him, crying happy tears when he met up with his family. He did not finish last.

Long after we each finished, our entourage found our way to a Mass Ave restaurant, aa thankfully short walk from our hotel. And when we arrived, yes, they were just coming out, all of us wearing our Boston Marathon Finishers Medals. Somehow, his looked shinier.

My last Boston was that day.

Over the next two-plus years, I trained as I always have trained. But a funny thing happened on the way to the Forum. I am slower, through no fault of my own. Like, one to two minutes per mile slower. Yes, I'm also older. Yes, the BQ standards aren't as difficult as when I was younger. Now, I am slow.

I have finally run my last marathon, knowing it was my last marathon, having asserted it would be my last marathon. That this was my final marathon came over me just a minute into the race. My first step over the start line timing mat, I knew. I knew running the next step followed by many more for 26.2 miles was not in my legs' plans. Passing the Mile 1 mark, I finally read and understood the memo. I was done on a point to point marathon course. 25 miles is a long time to ponder life's changes with each running step. 25 miles is a long way. That is the first time in my running life I'd made that observation. Who needed a sign? The next 294 minutes reinforced that this was my final tour of a marathon course.

There's a rhythm to my life. It's been in place for not quite 50 years. From the first day I laced up a pair of athletic shoes to go out the door to run two miles in my neighborhood, running has been the muse for my life's choices. I breathe, I run. Sometimes, I would complicate running through training strategies and the timing of the daily run, but running remained. Several years, I raced marathons. In the later years, I ran marathons. Occasionally, I survived running a marathon. This final marathon, I could only endure to its end. That's no way to run.

Before I became a distance runner, drawn to watching the marathon and to watching Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers, Rod Dixon iconically defeating Geoff Smith in the rain of New York City, Joan Benoit Samuelson, and always the Boston Marathon. But it was watching Boston every year on a workday Monday that convinced me to run a marathon. Running amidst "serious" runners who had to qualify for the privilege.

To get to Boston, I had to man up and finish a marathon in under 2:50:00. Ugh. Entering marathons in Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii, and Nevada. I raced to too many just-missed 2:50 finishing times in each of those attempts. Magic finally happened in a mid-fall marathon in Northern California on a cool, dry morning. I went under the required time. I went to Boston. In the years since, I've BQ'd nine times,

having gone to Boston in April following seven of those results. Wouldn't have changed a thing.

Realizing over the last two years of banging my head against 26.2-mile wall, that my marathoning has ended is more of a melancholy moment than any other emotion. I'll miss the three-hour runs in the early weekend morning, the long repeats, the tempo runs, the long intervals, each developing marathon strength. Absent will be the months'-long anticipation building slowly, steadily, and assuredly to the moment the race gun goes off, my internally knowing I had the ability and the will.

The sudden lack of the assured endorphin build into the marathon is what convinced me it was time to let go of marathoning. Without that adrenalin, a marathon is nothing more than too long of a run. I will truly miss that feeling of forcefully powering away from the start line into a long push to the finish, marking each mile completed as merely a step into the next mile, faster and faster, that steady, resilient strength in both mind and body.

You don't know when the end for a part of your life is coming and you don't truly ponder the loss until it happens. Once conscious of the loss, hindsight tells you what your subconscious was screaming at you. Stop! This isn't fun! Do something, anything else! So, I will. I thought about taking up smoking and drinking, but that thought was quickly discarded. Homestead upkeep is also not my preference. I have a better plan.

I'll continue quietly crawling from the bedroom, the cat following me to the kitchen. He'll receive his first of many daily feedings while I sip from yesterday's coffee, reheated for the moment. I'll dress for running and head out the door. The run won't be as long. Shorter, more leisurely most days, with a quick return home. Other mornings will be a wee bit longer and quicker. And, once a week will be a longer run that will be one-half of the length of the long marathon training run. It's all running.

Will I miss marathoning? Remember that a bear shits in the woods, water is wet, and an eagle soars. But there is another race around the bend that has my interest. I'll train for that while I run for myself. That race just won't be a marathon. That race won't be Boston. Time to tighten the laces on my running shoes. The morning offers great moments.