

## Texting for Shirts

Sometime in the early 1970's, watching a piece on television about a quarterback not quite good enough to play in the NFL, but who could afford to own a long convertible with a car phone, I recall the camera catching him saying on his phone that he had everything he needed, why did he need to be in the NFL? Watching that piece, in my early teens, I thought he was foolish.

Attending work conferences early in my career in the late 1980's, with very little cache, I longed to be important enough in my work to be one of the many attendees who would rush for the long rows of phone banks provided in whatever swank business-accommodating major hotel that was hosting the conference. I would step to a payphone, call my office, knowing there were no messages for me. all around me, a multitude of conferees would use their prepaid phone cards in accessing their offices and contacting their important clients. I used change. FOMO sucks.

Though texting through a mobile device became available in the mid-1990's, I did not own or use a Blackberry from which I could communicate via a small handheld keyboard, typing communications to clients and others who owned a device. My employer didn't deem my position worthy of my inclusion into that tech world. I thoroughly missed the "crackberry" phase. In my mind, that episode was worth being on the outside.

In the late '90's, the cellphone kept me from being left behind in the consumer tech world. I learned the hard way with each month's billing to keep calls to a minimum and texting even lighter. The shorter the call, the cheaper; the shorter the text, the better. As did most cellphone users, I went through cellphone companies like water through a cullender. I also found small cellphones to my liking. It fit into my pants pocket or a side pocket to my satchel. I miss the flip phone.

By 2007, having long since hit my career stride, having become so comfortable with my cellphone of choice that I recycled all my prior cellphones and their respective charge cords, our son graduated onto college while we moved across the country. Two years later, we found ourselves at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, watching him graduate to Marine, Private First Class E-2. Not that I knew what that signified. Turns out, he had an exemplary camp and ranked high on his rifle qualifications. Who knew.

At the conclusion of the graduation ceremony, each of us being proud of the others, we asked him what he wanted to do first, now that his 12-week training was over. “I want to buy an iPhone,” he said. Rather than ask him what that was, exactly, we drove to a store for that purpose. An Apple iPhone store, complete with shiny new cellphones under shiny movie lights, soft carpet, and a friendly worker to assist us. Who knew?

Donned in his khaki and olive military attire, with his hair cut to Corp specifications, clipped at the edges of the side and back, high and tight, he stood erect and tall in front of the long-haired employee, about the same age as our son, asking questions about the iPhone and its smartphone capabilities. I stood behind, just off to one side, listening. Marine Corps respectful, he asked each question with forethought, clarity, and civility, receiving a thoughtful and respectful answer in return. He knew what he wanted and why. Satisfied with the responses, our son stated concisely, “I would like to purchase an iPhone.” I leaned forward from the side and said, “make that two.”

Two years later, as is my want, I was tooling through the internet, okay, the Google, on my iPhone, looking for a future race to run, somewhere other than where I live. At the beginning of my never ending running adventure in the late ‘70’s, I found races through national and regional running magazines, race flyers at the local running stores, and occasionally through word of mouth. Four decades later, the Google was the go-to for race information, locally, regionally, nationally, internationally, and beyond. Oh yes, there is a beyond. Never been there myself.

Click. Click. Click. Scrolling down the list of potential races that could be of interest, occasionally stopping to look over one, only to find upon further inspection that that particular race didn’t float my boat, I resumed my search. Click. Click. Click – wait, what is that? A marathon and a half marathon. Over Labor Day weekend. Tupelo, Mississippi. Starts at 5 a.m. in the pre-dawn darkness to reduce time in the southeastern midday sun. Bring your own light source. That description didn’t exactly excite me. Reaching with my clicking finger over the backwards arrow, my eye caught a version of the race t-shirt.

Long-sleeved. Cotton. That wasn’t what caught my eye. Two colors, a soft mint green and a faded white, with the race logo on the sleeve and the running group’s name on the back with their thunderbolt logo. That also wasn’t why I stopped my

search. It was the tie dye use of the colors throughout the shirt. It was the race logo on the front of the t-shirt. The Jolly Roger. The race slogan. I had a winner.

Loud and proud on the t-shirt was the traditional skull and crossbones used for the flags flown by pirates, a symbol of piracy, designed to strike fear into the hearts of rival ships, signaling a willingness to attack without mercy. The death skull was overlaid on the crossing bones of the from the body of the dismembered skull. This version was all the more menacing covering most of the upper half of the long-sleeved shirt's front. And the skull was wearing Georgia State Trooper sunglasses.

That wasn't all or enough. There was more. Below the Jolly Roger was the race name in a strong curled font, with the two race distances below that. More impressively, above the skull and crossbones were the most perfect racing words ever seen by me: Trample the Weak, Hurdle the Dead. It doesn't matter the history of that slogan, only that runners who choose this race have a harbinger of what awaits them.

Mic drop.

Race entrants are running in the Labor Day heat and humidity of a Mississippi summer. They're starting and running in the dark for over an hour. Average Labor Day weekend temperature in Tupelo is just under 90 degrees. Average humidity is just below 80 percent. Most importantly, the real feel is near 100 degrees, the ground not having a chance to cool down before the sun rises on the race. Over the last half of the race, the runners best know they can hurdle the dead, trampling the weak on their way to the finish. Besides all that, there appeared to be a great spread at the end.

Once predawn turns to early morning sun, the runners head for the finish from whence they came, reminded that the full marathon turns around at 13.1 miles, running the course in reverse. The half marathoners now recall and realize the reality that they have another 1.1 miles after the halfway point to get to the same finish line. Those are the runners who should heed the advice offered by the race slogan. No prisoners, full commitment. No one cares that you don't finish. No one can not finish. The "ones" remembering that you did finish.

I also noticed that the race medal for the 14.2-mile race, the "half marathon," was a jagged cut metal version of the Jolly Roger, done in multiple colors. Also, the top five in my age category would receive a unique, handcrafted, made of wood, individual

division podium award. I looked at previous podium winners in my age division over the past years. With a decent summer's training, I could maybe snag one of those, which would be sweet.

I was in. Grabbing my iPhone, I hit the group text that included the Running Kids, the other masters-aged runners of which I was a member, suggesting we do the Saturday trek by car for the Sunday race, explaining the event, the course, the shirt, the logo with sunglasses, the slogan, the tie dye. By the end of the evening, we were unanimous. We were headed to Tupelo just a few months later. As was so famously offered in the group text: "the shirt! I've got to have the shirt!"

At summer's end, the running kids, along with over 300 other runners, dragged each other out of bed before 4 a.m., found coffee, a bit of nourishment, race day clothing, socks and shoes, and hats. Lining up in the predawn darkness before the race start is never a treat. The brain barely functions, the body yearns for more sleep, and there is an unseen mental fog in the darkness. But we were there. We had collected our race t-shirts, our race bib, and I had snagged not just one, but two – count 'em, two – race ballcaps with the skull and crossbones on the front. (One is now stained yellow and white from the sweat of a decade and a half of perspiration. The other is perfectly white.)

Though the first hour of running in darkness was a blur of flashlights worn and carried by most of the runners, there being no street lights much less lights emanating from the houses we passed, thus, no ability to read the mile splits much less see the mile splits before predawn light, we managed in a moving glom of energy, coming out the other side into defined neighborhoods, curving roadways, and tall southern trees. We began sniffing the finish, our respective race paces picking up with the rising of the morning sun.

Reaching the halfway point for the marathon, seeing the fastest runners going in reverse direction towards us, we accelerated into that halfway point, knowing we had just over a mile to the finish. I don't recall how many others I passed in that last mile-plus, but it was just enough to garner the age division award I sought, a story for another day. All I know is the drive home on the Natchez Trace was a satisfying one, my race shirts (I bought an extra one) in my bag, a soda in my hand, no regrets. Hurdling and trampling throughout the race made me think I was once a pirate, a thought I could accept.