

## The Sunday Times

Long before road races placed timing chips on the race bibs, longer still before the California International Marathon starting from Folsom, California and finishing at the California State Capital in Downtown Sacramento became a destination race in December, there was taking the bus from downtown to Folsom Dam at o'dark thirty in the morning.

The morning alarm sounds loud earlier than usual on race Sunday. Wise veteran runners lay out their race day attire the night before, including post-race gear. Driving to the bus collection point near the finish line some two hours before the race start, with the full intention of napping along to the rhythm of the bus's tires going over the roadway, adrenalin gets in the way while they chat up their bus seat partner. Start line arrival is in the pre-dawn darkness and it includes the unceremonious bus departure and that one brief moment of wonderment over "where am I;" "what am I doing here;" and, "Oh! God! Did I really volunteer for this?"

You sure did, along with 2,000 other runners. It could be worse. These days, over 20,000 have been known to register to run from Folsom Dam through horse country into the Sacramento suburbs, past Sac State, and into the Downtown corridor stretch. The elites seeking Olympic Trials qualification drag the majority running behind them into fast times. You can almost see Elk Grove in the distance.

At this juncture, so far from the race start and yet with the start looming ever closer, you are waiting for your body to encourage itself to visit – with purpose – the long line of port-a-potties. Herein lies the rub. Stopping during the marathon to conduct personal business is less than ideal. So is waiting in a long, long line of runners equally as driven to conduct their business in one of the unavailable portable loo's. And, heaven forbid, what should transpire should your body not cooperate. Ahem, holding it for 26.3 miles is just not an option. So at half an hour before the marathon start, you move through the cold of the dawning morning to begin the long stand in line.

And then, just a few standees in front of your position, you see him. Well, to be accurate, what you see is what is tucked into his right armpit. The Sunday New York Times. In print. Complete with all sections of that edition. Thick. He wasn't even glancing over the headlines. That protocol was clearly being saved following his

throwing the latch closed behind him after his entry into the port-a-loo. Great, you think. You also realize this may be the moment when changing lines may be to your advantage. He was ahead of you and he most certainly had no intention of speed reading. He is proof of the space-time continuum.

As the newspaper guy goes into the port-a-let, you and everyone else behind him in the line for that port-a-let, move lines, exacerbating the effect of time speeding up while the space to achieve the goal dwindles, but not as rapidly as the loss from the sped-up time. And, this uneven parallel continues through the race announcer's five-minute call to the race start, causing many to depart their place in one of the many lines, heading to the start by way of the post-race clothing drop off. The few of you remaining in a line hear the call of the one-minute start call. Without warning, you are the only one remaining in the personal problem area. Shirley, you think, you can take care of your personal issues, jog the 200 yards to the clothing drop off, and get to the start line timely. Don't call me Shirley and don't expect miracles just as the starter's siren goes off.

Recall again, that this race, in this year, was before chips on race bibs. Business first. Once that task is accomplished, the post-race clothing bag is filled, tied, and tagged with the race number. The pre-marathon race warmup is the jog to the clothing drop off, followed by the 200-yard jog to the start line. Approaching the line, the digital clock shows the race has been on for over four minutes. Almost five minutes late.

The only reason I chose this race was to qualify for the Boston Marathon. I needed a finishing time of two hours, fifty minutes. I had both the ability and the training to finish with that time. What I didn't have was the ability to run 2:44:00. By the time I arrived at the start line, the elapsed race time was five minutes. I had to determine, on the run (pun intended) whether my race was a complete disaster, or, whether I could make a glorious effort that morning. The course is point to point. I had no choice but to run to the finish, back to my car. I'm that guy that steps into a room full of horse manure and starts digging and looking for the horse.

What the hell, I thought. I have nothing to lose. No one cares themselves with my finish time. They'll nod their acknowledgment that I finished CIM, not that I trained for this one event to earn a BQ. They won't understand why starting the race timely is the first step in achieving that goal. Why would they? But I would know. To this day,

decades later I know. Racing is simple: just run. So, I chose to run the race, knowing it would be a glorious failure.

My approach to the start line awakened the race announcer perched up high on his tower. He shot a glance my way, followed my running towards the start, saw my race bib, and just stared at me. I saw his expression, mixed with bemusement, horror, and resignation for me. I called out, "Hey! Where are the others in my party? I am their leader and I need to locate them!" He called back to me, "They went that way, Kemosabe!" His right arm shot straight out from his side, aiming down the road from the start line. "Excellent," I responded, adding, "Hi ho, Silver, away!" We left each other on those terms, 5:36 into the race.

On that race morning, a Boston qualifying time for me was 6:29 per mile pace for each mile to the finish line. 6:29 per mile, 26 times, no rest break. While I could run the qualifying time, my missing the race start added that 5:36 to whatever race time I ran. Completing my mission now required each mile to be run in 6:17. I was going to be late to the finish line.

I was young, naïve about my ability, and determined to rule the world. The perfect mindset to sally forth on the doomed quest. Sensing I was destined to run this race as if I were Don Quixote chasing windmills, after making the righthand turn away from the starting line, I mentally settled in, determined to . . . run. Mama didn't raise no fool.

In the opening miles, a mixture of horse farms, private estates, and properties with ambiance, I gently but swiftly passed the walkers, the slower runners, and the horses making their fast, graceful approach in the cool morning fog, snorting into the mist, checking out the aberration of humans passing in masse. Once the first 6 miles were behind me, turning onto Fair Oaks Blvd., I'd found a rhythm, hitting my stride, each stride seemingly leading to my passing yet another runner or even a gaggle of runners. For that moment, should you be a runner, you'd have wished to be me.

I'd found my marathon race groove. My entire body was relaxed in carrying out the process: my neck loosely hung on my shoulders. My spine was rigid and concurrently supple in holding up my hips carrying the weight from my feet determining the directed pacing in my legs. I felt little effort in my practiced pacing, much less any

strain. I only had the question of just how long would I hold this feeling at this pace. Since that answer was out of my control, I found cruise control, holding it gently.

Steering clear of packs of runners, I chose to run on the far left, moving only across the road diagonally when a necessary. Unencumbered with foot traffic, my cadence led me softly to each mile marker, not to mention my ceaseless passing of runners that, but for the pre-race latrine issues, I would not have seen. Passing them was merely another part of the process, just as running into the fierce early December wind that hit us from the side, coming in from the north before crossing the river. By that point in the marathon, I was mentally locked in, my legs keeping up with the mentally-focused tempo.

Beginning when I passed 58th Street, now running on J Street, I accelerated my pace with each numbered street down to 30th Street. Then, left on Alhambra, right on L Street with more street counting. It's not Boston's right on Hereford, left on Boylston, but it'll do. Down L, the street countdown continues in earnest down to 8th Street, before the sharp double left onto the street and the view of the California State Capitol. In my mind, the north wind laid down, my passing countless now-exhausted runners reaching a crescendo. That biting wind never died, but I do know the number of runners passed increased greatly, because I put down the hammer over the last 3.2 miles.

In fact, over the last 10km of the race, my per mile pace was faster with each passing mile. At the 20-mile wall, I was holding 6:25 pace overall. Upon finishing, that pace had dropped to 6:20 per mile. I finished just five minutes over my goal. Standing just past the finish line, doing the standard post-marathon check in with my body, elation oozing throughout me, it was a helluva of an effort on my part. successful in every aspect but one. There would be other Boston qualifiers by me, but not from this marathon. Pure running for running's sake. That's what I had just experienced.

And, I wouldn't change any part of that experience. Distance running is learned patience. Put on running gear and shoes. Go out the door. Run. Distance racing is dogged determination, built from that learned patience. Line up. Race faster. learn the fine line between running and racing, and, between racing too fast and just fast enough. In this marathon, on this day, I'd found the fine line. No medal can replace that feeling. To this day, I wonder just when the fellow and his Sunday Times exited the porta-go.