

Transitions

I use a marathon race bib as my page mark in my running logs. I have a log for each year of my amateur distance run career. Since December 2017, this race bib has been repurposed. The front of it shows my race number for that day. Atop that number is my first name in white again a red background bleeding into dark purple at the bottom. To the left of the number is the marathon race logo. Below is the tag showing my bib number, age, name, city and state, t-shirt size, and my finishing time handwritten on the tag. That time is why I repurposed the bib. The race bib shows number 744.

For an unknown valid reason at the time, long ago forgotten by me, in the early fall of 2017, I registered for that December marathon. I hadn't raced a good marathon for the three decades before this attempt. Of course, the first half of those prior decades I was raising a child, becoming a husband, settling into my professional career, moved residence six times, and, discovered I could play age group baseball.

Somehow, I convinced myself I could run this marathon, this time, better than I had in the attempts over the second half of those prior decades. No matter that I had raced this same race five times with little to no success. But it's within driving distance of my home, held in a hidden gem of the southeast region, and because I'd convinced a running friend to register, it was at least going to be an enjoyable experience.

Then, just days before the marathon, a freezing storm worked its way down from the plains states, blowing in cold air, freezing temperatures, and snow. Snow falling in the winter in the mid-south states is not a surprise. Heavy snowfall in early December is a different issue altogether. The race was scheduled for Saturday. The snow fell heavy Thursday into Friday. Snow banks, blinding in the late-fall darkness greeted us at our hotel, situated just a quarter mile to the marathon start line. I don't sense I would have raced that day in those conditions.

Cutting wind blew through us, accompanying our short walk to the race expo from which I retrieved my race number and shirt, and then from our car to the hotel lobby. Clinging to the hope that the wind would pass through overnight, taking the frigid air with it, we dined, watched a bit of tv, read, said goodnight to our wives, triple set the

alarms for the early morning race, finally falling asleep sometime before midnight. I slept hard that night.

Pre-dawn darkness, morning coffee, a banana, oatmeal, water, all part of my marathon morning breakfast, accompanied my packing the gels into my race clothing, before dressing myself with my racing kit, and my consternation regarding our race weather. The sun showed up. The leafless trees weren't swaying in any sort of wind, much less a breeze. I was covered head to feet. Following a feeble attempt at jogging over reduced snow banks and ice, we gingerly walked to the arena adjacent to the race start.

Warming up in the arena's carpeted hallways, the indoor temperature a pleasant 60ish, I gave away my drop bag to the race officials, telling them I'd see them in a few hours. Waiting until just one minute before the race siren would go off, I stepped into the aggressively-brisk air, the streets now drenched in sun, the road ice visibly melting into a lot of street water. The first steps into the race, following the national anthem, the rousing cheers for the local celebrity starting us off, and the reminder to watch for ice, were quick, tentative but quick.

Having predetermined I would hang around the pacer that would get me to a Boston Qualifier, I slipped in behind his projected finish time paper stuck to his stick. Surrounded by other likeminded runners, I was alone in a compacted field of marathoners. Females and males of varying ages and different sizes, myriad shoe makes, divergent abilities, each internally struggling to relax their nerves, while simultaneously maintaining their adopted race paces, all moved forward, a large blanket of color passing over the streets.

Passing the first mile marker, after glancing at my watch, I knew immediately that my chosen pacer had himself chosen to be an ass. He was running a pace that would have me an hour faster than my current ability. Close enough to hear me, I loudly informed him he was running too fast. I was ignored but no longer alone. Many around me chose, like me, to back down the pace, a pace I maintained without effort over the first seven miles run in the first hour.

My friend, tough as nails when he runs, bailed on the race when the course reached halfway, bringing us back to the start/finish at the arena. I'd lost track of him after the first 10km, he having mumbled he wasn't feeling the effort. In my head, I asked myself whether I was feeling the effort. I raced on. At some point, while traversing

varied adjoining neighborhoods, some containing stately homes with large canopies of mature trees, others lacking lawncare or pride of ownership, I noticed I was running stride for stride with a very large shadow on my left.

His shoulders were as wide as he was tall. He was taller than me and I'm hugging being six feet tall. His thighs, covered in winter running wear were wider than my slim physique. He had no waist. His stride was fluid. He. Was. Big. Seeing that I'd finally noticed him, we began that in-marathon running conversation that can only happen by circumstance. In midsentence passing through the halfway point, he pointed out his wife, we both waved. She smiled back, happy in her husband enjoying himself.

Coffee works. Just after the mile 14 marker, I located a vacated portapotty for my purposes. Time consuming because I had to remove mittens to get to the layers of clothing, complete the task, put myself back together, get out the door after remembering to unlatch the door hook, and get back into running rhythm, while I'd lost my race companion, I knew I had to work to catch back up to him. More importantly, for the first time in this marathon, not to mention the others I'd competed in over the prior 20 years, I just might be able to snag a BQ, something I'd not accomplished over the prior three-plus decades. I held my race pace.

I caught up with him just after mile 18, the course taking us through the winterized version of an otherwise lush park in the summer months. His pace had ticked up a bit, but his body was beginning to tense from the midrace effort. Miles 14-20 in a marathon are challenging because they not only are the last miles before "the wall," they are also miles 14-20. Slowing just enough to check on him, I let him know that he had the running strength to finish under four hours. Then, I asked his permission to go on at a greater clip. Without batting an eye or being disappointed to run on without me, he simply said, "go."

I went. Picking up my race pace through the park, passing the 20-mile mark, calculating the pace I needed to hold in finishing under the BQ time I needed. Thinking that sustained pace was doable just before crossing into another neighborhood, I began holding that pace, Then, I ran faster.

My mile splits in the last 10km were my fastest miles in the race, each mile a tick faster than the previous, my 26th and last mile being 15 seconds faster than my mile 20 split. In fact, the last 10km was euphorically close enough to my most recently

best 10km race time. In the last miles of a marathon, when does that happen? Almost never for me. But on this morning, in the now only cold, crisp air under a clear sunlit morning, that was happening for me. And, I got to play my favorite game in counting the runners I passed in my haste to the finish over the last 6.2 miles. I passed a lot of runners in myriad stages of their own suffering.

I ran with glee in my mind and my feet. Over uneven asphalt streets, gazing always just ahead the next runner, I glided in stride. I run tall, my knees barely landing in a bent position. I run with small strides, always with that deceptive appearance I'm about to pick up my pace. On this morning, in this marathon, in the last 10km, my running stride was more elegant than usual. Noticing that every stride led to another, always just a tick faster, cruising from one mile marker starting with a "2" to the next, the runners I passed remained a constant trickle, until passing runners became a drip, until passing runners became a rarity, because there were no runners left to pass.

Qualifying for Boston required my per mile pace to be quick enough for me to cover the last 10km well under an hour. Mile 21 was on pace, taking my through numerous turns in a neighborhood of older homes and ridden hard apartments. Mile 22 was quicker than pace, turning onto a long straight, the same road we had run following my stop. Mile 23 remained on the road, my pace becoming a bit faster still. By now, I was running out of racers to pass. Passing one more runner in Mile 24 after turning right onto a silent road, my per mile pace faster, I ran alongside a regional park devoid of any activity, save the final aid station. During Mile 25, I ran alone with my thoughts. Outwardly, my game face demonstrated only a relaxed outward determination. Inside my head were explosions of fun, joy, and the thrill of success. Into Mile 26, I could hear the finish-line area. It was time to go! And, I did. The final mile plus the last .2 of the 26.2 distance were the fastest paces of my entire race. I crossed the finish line.

I saw the digital finish line clock. I had BQ'd. I glanced at my wrist and my running watch. I was going to Boston. Gathering all that in, I stopped my post-race walk. Dropping my upper torso as I were going to launch into a cannonball, fists clenched for the explosion, I shot up, proud and tall, let out a "hell yeah!," before moving on. Don't know if anyone acknowledged the moment. I let out the same yell when my race compatriot came in under four hours, achieving his goal. He and his wife cried happy tears. That was a good day.