

THE TRUE TEST OF ENDURANCE:  
RUNNING A MARATHON WITH THE RUNS

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The first signs of the diarrhea began at the six-mile mark. It is feeling every marathoner dreads.

Maybe it was the excessive coffee and the bran muffins for breakfast, maybe it was just nervousness. Yet in my previous eight marathons, a similar dietary routine had created no ill effect. But now, as I approached the six-mile mark, and with at least two and a half hours of running ahead of me, I had a foreboding fire brewing somewhere deep within my bowels.

It was 1996 when the old Deseret News Marathon route started halfway up Parleys Canyon at the Mountain Dell Golf Course. From there it followed the road over the mountain and down into Emigration Canyon. The course continued on to Salt Lake City, down Main Street along the Pioneer Days Parade route and ended up at Liberty Park. That is where I would collapse, but not before crossing the finish line.

I was feeling pretty good up until six miles. My stride was easy and effortless, my training completely adequate to the task ahead of me. But the gurgling in my lower bowels foreshadowed an approaching storm in parts of the body one would rather not have attention on and promised the necessity of a diversion off the road to do that which should only be done behind closed doors.

As any marathon runner can attest, modesty is not a useful virtue. I recall the old starting line at the Las Vegas Marathon was a barren desert landscape grossly under-equipped with Porta-Potties. The men and women stood or squatted out in the open relieving themselves of their pre-marathon bodily fluids and no one seemed to pay them any mind as they trotted by in their pre-marathon warm-up. I also remember the Boston Marathon where the local residents of Hopkinton (where the race begins) had their gardens and shrubbery thoroughly and rather overtly “watered” as some of the thousands of runners responded to the call of nature that always seems to be heard just before the starting gun. That’s just the way it is. Necessity overrides modesty.

As I passed the six-mile mark at the summit of Emigration Canyon and saw the canyon road descend through a virtual forest of scrub oak. I was relieved that I could retain some sense of decency shielded by the trees and the surrounding bushes in order to deal with my temporary bodily concern. I figured a foray into the scrub oak would handle this little episode of the back-door trots.

I won’t get into detail, but my first side-trip was encouraging, and I trotted back onto the marathon course confident that the problem was behind me now. Unfortunately, it was

not long before I realized the problem was indeed behind me, but not back in the scrub oak where I hoped it would remain.

Another half mile resulted in another excursion onto the bushes that once again failed to yield the desired relief of the condition. As I re-joined the runners on the course, I had a dire sense—occasioned by a growing pressure within my bowels—that this would not be the end of my detours into the woods. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be long until I passed the protective cover of the scrub oak and began entering civilization, where a lack of modesty is not only discouraged, but illegal.

Many of you may think that this is the time to call it a day. When the scoots begin scooting, it is time to retire to the bathroom and remain there until one feels secure at a reasonable distance from the commode.

However, you need to understand the mentality of a marathon runner—or at least this one. One trains for months on end, through grueling runs, nagging injuries, agonizing wind sprints and laborious canyon workouts to achieve sufficient conditioning to run a marathon in an acceptable time. To me that time was around the three-hour mark.

During this ruthless training, one steels his resolve to continue to run despite the inevitable rebellion of the body and to take each training run to its intended conclusion and always—come hell or high water, or in this case, Montezuma's revenge—to take the marathon to the finish line.

That was my mentality and there was no other mentality—I was going to finish the race and there would be no breaks other than the urgent necessities that I knew would be coming down the road. In my mind, there was no other option.

In retrospect, that was entirely insane, but I make no claim to my sanity here. I have no defense for what I did on that day—only inspiration for this literary work, nearly twenty years later which will serve as a confession.

The third excursion into the trees came at the eight-mile mark as I continued hoping desperately—as I would continue to do over the next 16 miles—that this next stop would exorcise the liquid demons within me. Ahead of me the canyon wound through a residential area where there would be little or no cover for me and my dischargement activities.

I continued on, however, a true marathon runner, with the single mindedness of a charging grizzly. Never did the thought cross my mind to quit though my body screamed for retreat to a quiet place where I could sit upon the porcelain throne and suffer through this malady in secure isolation.

Memories are spotty from this point, but I believe I took a fourth deviation from the course at ten miles where, thankfully, they had placed a few Porta-Potties along the road where I spent a little more time behind the protective walls in an attempt to cure my affliction, knowing that down the road there would be no hidden retreat for me to perform this unpleasant deed. I was now in a residential area of the canyon. Nevertheless, I continued on in my single-minded simpleness. Like a wounded soldier in a noble battle, I no longer resorted to reason, but only to the job at hand.

By now, the effort to arrest the flow began to consume as much energy as the strain of running. I felt my energy waning as I struggled to keep the internal pressures from breeching the lower hatch and creating a scene that no human should witness or endure.

And yet I had twelve miles to go.

Finally, we came upon a restaurant near the mouth of the canyon where I knew there must be public restrooms—only to find the restaurant was not yet open. Necessity can drive a man to do very unsocial things. In my panic to locate a restroom I found an unlocked door and barged in, finding myself—ironically enough—in the prep area.

“Where are the restrooms?” I demanded of the nearest prep cook in a tone of desperation that discouraged any objection to my trespassing. She pointed the way hesitantly and I dashed down the corridor and thankfully entered the men’s room. At last, I had sanctuary where I may do my duty in a proper place with access to all the things I had sorely missed—namely toilet paper and a sink. I don’t ask you to imagine how I handled the previous stops. Being a somewhat dignified man I have purposely omitted the sordid details as I do not feel that is appropriate to my story.

When I returned to the course, I had a renewed strength and a confidence that the worst was over and I could make it to the finish line with a sub-par, yet respectable time.

It wasn’t to be. The fire below continued burn and the pressure cooker that had become my bowels once again began to re-pressurize and foretell of a coming expulsion that no sphincter could arrest.

To make matter worse, I was in the city now.

To this day, I chuckle at the little clump of scrub oak that served as the only available cover for my seventh relief stop. It is cut in the landscaped grass overlooking the busy corner of Foothill Drive and Sunnyside Avenue at the eighteen-mile mark and anyone who happened to be looking in that direction on that day would have surely spotted a desperate man in a compromising position.

I shake my head and sadly chuckle even today when I drive past the Market Street Grill a mile down the road from the scrub oak and recall on that day barging through the door, literally running down the hall past the startled host in shoes muddy from my excursion into the clump of oaks, to the men's room, only to dash out again and resume my insane run through the city of Salt Lake.

I continued my dogged quest for the finish line, paying no heed to rationality or the exhaustion that threatening to defeat my purpose.

When I arrived at Main Street at the twenty-three mile mark, my affliction had finally passed as there was nothing left for my body to expel. I was spent and exhausted from my struggle with my internal demons and, had I been of sane mind, embarrassment at the inevitable leakage that simply could not be avoided despite my best efforts.

I recall the crowds of people along the parade route clapping and cheering for the marathon runners who always foreran the upcoming Pioneer Days Parade, but I had no feeling of validation for my efforts and no desire to be cheered. It would be tantamount to cheering a critical patient on the operating table—it just doesn't fit.

I had but a few miles to go now and I trudged on numbly, doggedly, insanely toward the finish line, knowing this nightmare would soon be over—but only if I crossed that finish line or indeed, fell down dead on Main Street.

I know as I passed the cheering people along the street, had they looked after me, they would have certainly turn on a sour expression as they would no doubt see that my yellow shorts were not entirely yellow. I will leave it at that.

In the context of this story, what is important is that I did finish the race. With my last ounce of energy, I staggered across the finish line and collapsed into a nearby stretcher. At the time, I wondered why I received little attention for my anemic, dehydrated state; but in retrospect I understand, for my smell must have been as foul as a baby's diaper. Eventually I was able to rise to my feet and slowly limp to an awaiting bus that shuttled the runners to their cars; too tired to care about of the offensive smell that no doubt pervaded the area surrounding me as I stood in the aisle of the bus, preferring not to leave my mark upon the seat.

Now I am sure that those who read this tale must surely think it fiction, but I assure you that it is the utter truth. Possibly, a majority of marathon runners may be appalled at my disregard for common sense and propriety; but I think that some of you—the hardcore distance runners—are smiling and nodding as you understand the concept of “damn the torpedoes”—or in my case “damn the trots”—and to those runners, I dedicate this story.

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