

The
Mid-Packer's
Lament

BY
Christopher J.
Russell

The Mid-Packer's Lament

Running stories about the view from the middle

By

Christopher J. Russell

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This is an original work.

E-Book introduction:

Greetings my running friends!

I'm proud to present the e-book version of my book of running short stories, "[The Mid-Packer's Lament](#)". 200 fine physical pages chock full of my particular brand of running musings, including many previously unpublished efforts!

[The Mid-Packer's Lament](#) is a series of short stories on long distance running, racing and the human comedy inherent in all sports enthusiasts. This is the perfect book for runners and wannabe runners. There are stories about training, eating, special places and special races. There are stories about the accidental athlete in all of us and the stupid things we do for even amateur endeavors. Whether you are a weekend mid-pack runner or a competitive club runner, you'll find something thought provoking and amusing that you can relate to in the [Mid-Packer's Lament](#).

If you prefer to absorb your words from the pressed remnants of trees - the book is available at ([Amazon.com page](#)) - If you would like a signed copy I usually have a few kicking around that I can personalize for a gift, etc.

I can be found at my website www.runrunlive.com or by shooting me an email at chrisrunner@runrunlive.com.

You can also subscribe to my podcast by searching the iTunes store for 'runrunlive'...

Thanks for listening and we'll see you out there.

Chris,

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Introductory comments

What will you find here?

You will find here a number of stories. Some are told with an amusing wink of the ironic eye. Some look outwardly at the beauty of the world around us, and others look inward at the runner's mind.

Each is prefaced with a brief introduction that attempts to let some light fall on the particulars of its genesis so that you may glimpse the workings of the machine and better understand the context.

These stories all fall into bite size 1500 word chunks on average. This size seems to be the current limit of my attention span, or maybe betrays the amount of free time for scribbling I have in any given week. At the risk of unforgivable crudeness this would be a perfect tome to perch by your porcelain as you comfort yourself before your run.

What you won't find is any 'how-to' instructions on running or any 'my first marathon' stories – that's been done to death. You may find some bad grammar, misused vocabulary and unverified 'facts', but hey, that's life.

I have chosen to self publish this collection in order not to bother those editors, already overwhelmed by starving young authors, with my additional pile of tripe. Instead I will take that pile of tripe directly to you, dear reader, because you have made the great mistake of showing some willingness to be subjected to my musings in the past. You have my heartfelt "Thank You!" for your attention. Feel free to contact me with your comments at cyktrussell@yahoo.com.

Have fun and keep running...

Chris,

Dedications and inspirations

I would like to briefly thank everyone who made this collection possible.

Of course the list must start with my family; Yvonne, Katie and Teresa who have to share a life with me and my compulsions. My Mom and Dad who come and see me race when no one else will. My sisters and brother who always tell me I can do things when I am afraid.

- My mates at CoolRunning who gave me the opportunity to appear in print; thanks to Kevin, Dave and Steve.
- The Squannacook River Runners and the Groton Road Race, a great club and a great bunch of people.
- The folks at GEOCOMtms who put up with me and kindly subsidize my addictions.

There's another long list that includes Vladimir Nabakov with his beautiful, richly appointed prose, Dave Barry with his perfect comic timing, James Fennimore Cooper with his deep green forest tableaux, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Kurt Vonnegut with his twisted alternate universes, Isaac Asimov with his human nature driven space operas, Ray Bradbury for just writing great short stories, Steinbeck for Tortilla Flats and Cannery Row, Philip Marlow, Orsin Scott Card, Ernest Hemmingway with his pregnant simplicity, James Joyce and his friend Homer, H. D. Thoreau who could stand under a tree in the rain and contemplate Greek philosophy, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and all their melancholy Russian friends, and the hundreds of other luminaries that I've had the privilege to spend long plane rides with.

Why I run

Seeds of running

I don't think I truly became a runner until I was already sliding downhill away from youth. I grew up with it, but it didn't become a passion until the middle of my third decade. I run because it suits my nature. I run because it has become part of me. I run because it is an integral part of how I define 'me'. Running is something that owns me as much as I own it.

In many ways running has become a great enabler in my life. In other ways it is also a benign addiction and a crutch. Either way, running has made my existence both physically and mentally much more fulfilling. It has been a grand vehicle of discovery and self-realization. Let me share with you how I got to this place. Understanding where I'm coming from may help you enjoy the ride.

Portrait of the artist as a young runner

I remember my Dad running with my Uncle when I was 6 or 7 years old. They ran on the railroad tracks that, ironically, are now a rail trail my club runs on. They were of the generation where every able-bodied man did a stint in the armed forces. Among other useful disciplines, the military impressed upon their generation that if you want to get in shape, or stay in shape, you run. You might say it was part of that generation's basic training. For them it was 'jogging'.

I tried to run with them. It was a hot summer day. The rails smelled of coal and oil. The sandy hills were wooded thick with oak and pine. The cicadas screeched. I was a chubby kid, a late developer with little athletic ability. I ran like all beginner kids do. Brief bursts of uncomfortable movement followed by gasping and walking. I didn't know then that thirty years later this same basic activity would become such a big part of my life.

I ran cross country for two years in prep school. I did this primarily for two reasons, first, because sports were mandatory, second to get in shape for wrestling season. I didn't have any natural speed or talent. I was the 5th man on a 5 man team, a place holder. I had good lung capacity, a strong heart and a reasonable tolerance for discomfort.

Through college and my 20's I ran fitfully. I always knew it was there, but I was young, invincible and much too busy to be burdened with an exercise routine. With the peripatetic nature of youth I would embark on fervent conditioning campaigns that had grand schemes, but I would quickly tire of them and recede into a more recreational lifestyle.

An old friend

At the end of my third decade I was a heavy drinking, overworked and overweight man who spent 80% of the time on the road traveling for work. Running was always in the back of my mind as my escape route from the evils of a consuming lifestyle. For a decade it had been relegated to something I should get around to.

In the early 90's, circumstances aligned to help me get around to it. I had a six month stint where I was in the office and not traveling. The office had two running enablers. The first was a locker room with a shower and the second was a coworker named Larry. I started with ½ a mile 3 times a week. Soon, Larry and I started running 3-5 miles at lunch, every other day.

Through the process I noticed a couple of things. First I noticed that I felt better about myself when I ran. Second, I realized that Larry and I were having the most lucid and insightful conversations. The miles opened up and oiled our minds like a Guinness in an Irish pub.

The Bug

Soon enough I was running local races. I was a nascent runner with a casual training schedule of 15 miles a week. It got to the point where I started to feel restless and in need of a challenge.

In 1997 circumstance prevailed once more. One of my friends and casual running partners said "Let's run the Boston Marathon". With the Hubris, machismo and clueless-ness of my species I failed to realize the incredible folly of this suggestion.

Blissfully unaware of impending doom we trained a little and 'jumped in' to the 101st running of the big event. I will spare you the 'my first marathon' story. It is sufficient to say that I got my ass kicked worse than I had ever had before in my life. This level of suffering was beyond anything I had previously believed possible. I only remember flashes after Newton Lower Falls. I swore I would never do that to myself again.

Then I got angry. This thing had beaten me. I was angry because I thought I could do better, I didn't think I gave it my best shot. I felt cheated. At that point, my self esteem was at stake. I made a commitment to myself to give it my best effort and qualify that fall.

I took a training program off of the internet. (where else?) I scripted a daily workout schedule. The final week of the plan I ran 5 X 1 mile speed intervals, 8 X 1 mile tempo intervals and a 26.2 mile test run of the course. From the 4th of July to October I lost 25 – 30 pounds. At the end of the day I qualified easily with

plenty left in the tank. The following Boston I set my marathon PR (so far) at 35 years old.

It was an epiphany for me on many levels. I had always assumed that I was non-athletic, but here I had accomplished this insanely difficult athletic thing. Maybe the only thing stopping me was my own assumptions? What else was possible that I had assumed was not? I learned that you can accomplish anything if you break it down into daily chunks of execution. Execute each day and you will be where you want to be at the finish.

The process forced me to spend 15 – 20 hours a week alone with myself in exercise induced introspection. Like a sledge hammer blow to a light bulb permanently changes that light bulbs attitude, the experience changed me. The routine of training, challenge of training and the moral worthiness of training was a much welcomed rudder to my drift.

Where this book came from

Fast forward a couple years and I find my runs filling my head with words that nag me to write them down, but who has time?

It started one night in an austere rental apartment in the midst of a Quebec City winter. Things were unsettled in my world. Our company's investors had made us the gift of a particularly invasive and domineering boss who wrung long hours and long days out of me and the rest of the executive team. I was trying to get up before dawn to train. I was traveling on business almost full time.

It was after midnight, working late on my laptop, just back from a nasty winter run, when *Le Frosty Runs* drained from my subconscious onto the page. I was thinking, "Here I am a 40+ executive living on 4 hours of sleep a night and I'm getting up at 5:00 AM to run intervals in the dark and ice and -10 degree weather. Someone else would surely enjoy this absurdity!" I wrote it down and sent it off to my friends, including my mate Kevin over at CoolRunning who posted it.

The jolt I got (the cartoon light bulb over the head) was that writing about running was easy and was as therapeutic as the runs themselves. It was as if running had provided me with the funhouse glasses to clearly view myself and my world. What I saw was the human experience, or as Balzac would say, "the human comedy", in microcosm with all its irony, humor, cynicism, pain, drudgery, courage, weakness and love.

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Section 1

Running for the joy of it

Busy as a beaver

Introduction:

This is my paean to my beloved woods. I grew up in countryside Massachusetts. Mine was a world of woods and trails, grassy fields and enigmatic stone walls long before I started running. I found solace in the friendly solitude.

This was one of the first pieces I wrote when I started this compilation. My intention was to have the reader *feel* the woods as I feel them, warm, loving, receptive, energizing and healing. I find my woods are an anchor and a sense of ancient permanence in a transient modern existence.

Wildlife returns to suburbia and adds a touch of life to trail running.

I found myself, one crisp morning, playing tag with a stag. He'd explode through the underbrush parallel to my course. He'd bound ahead, in great, crashing, white-tailed leaps, and then pause, alert and majestic, observing me from a safe distance.

He evidently wanted to be on the other side of the 17th century carriage road I was running, but couldn't decide if it was safe to cross in front of me. Even with my comparably plodding progress, through no intentional malice, my direction was flanking him. He finally decided I wasn't a threat, (or that I was a pretty slow threat), and with a flash of tawny muscle and antler cleared the old stonewall and was gone.

My yard backs up to acreage of undeveloped wood and conservation land. I've carved out a woodland 10k that has become my base mileage home. It's my bread-and-butter training run, but more than that it's my sanctuary.

I don't live in the country. There are very few undeveloped plots left in my town 40 miles northwest of Boston. Luckily for me the populace has had the foresight to squirrel away a few gems, and one of them is my back yard.

The land is rolling hills and new woodland. 'New' meaning it hasn't been logged for 30-40 years. There are interconnecting carriage roads that date to Revolutionary times. The running surface is soft pine needles, leaves, moss and lichen patina rocks. It's as forgiving on the impact as it is challenging for the ankles.

My favorite features are the 17th century farmers' walls. They speak to me of first generation farmers clearing the fields with sweat and real horse power.

In order to till the unforgiving New England soil they had to wrest thousands of enormous stones from the glacial till. Then, after pulling the stones from the ground, they stacked them with old-world care along the periphery to delineate their work. I hope these works of art live on. I'd hate to see them rendered for suburban landscape props.

The wildlife is returning. I know it. I see the deer, or recent evidence of them, everyday. I see them in the morning, rooting under the snow and leaves for groundwater springs and acorns. I see their tracks fresh in the snow.

I never see the coyote, but they are out there. My kids saw one as it dashed out of the woods to steal one of our unsuspecting bantam chickens. Then it was gone. I see their tracks in the snow, usually following the deer, close behind, waiting for a sign of weakness or a wrong move.

In one spot I cross a stream. I have constructed a crude bridge from a split pine log. The other morning the stream was frozen over hard with a sub-zero snap. It had snowed. There was just a little dusting on the mirror surface. There were the tracks of the coyote, like crime scene fingerprints in the dust, only minutes old. I hope they don't get too hungry and develop a taste for Asics Antelope.

Part of my route takes me along the edge of a pond. In the fall I was stopped abruptly in my tracks by a fallen tree. There had been some wind, but this wasn't a dead tree. This was a live red oak tree about four inches in diameter. At first glance the end appeared to be cut. On closer inspection it was more than cut; it was sharpened like a pencil.

Then it hit me. Beavers were at work here today. Looking around I saw all the small trees in the area had been gnawed off about a foot above the ground. I must have surprised them as they were dragging this woodland trophy off to an aquatic lair. I probably put them behind schedule in building their winter home.

Next time I came through the tree was gone, and so were several more. I can't wait to see what fantastic engineering projects the next year's generation cooks up.

In the summer I will routinely raise my heart rate by flushing families of pheasant in the meadows. They wait until you're right on top of them and explode upwards in a noisy panic. Sometimes it is my privilege to catch sight of the Great Blue Heron stabbing at frogs and fish from their stilts in the shallows. Rumor has it that there are moose and black bear in my wood, but we have managed to avoid each other so far.

In the summer it's dry and buzzing with deer flies, ticks and poison ivy. In the spring it's mud season. I like the early summer, the fall and the winter. In the winter the new snow reveals a riot of tracks, evidence of a very active animal social life.

There is a little mouse that makes his home in the end of a stonewall that I run by. He peppers the snow each day with his little tracks as he explores his universe. The woodpeckers rapid fire “knock-knock-knock” hangs in the air as they try to entice mates and scare grubs out of dead, hollow trees.

There are wild turkey runs, where a whole flock of these crazy wild birds will cut a swath through the snow. Their tracks look like three-toed dinosaur tracks. They don't go in a straight line. They weave a path three or four feet wide back and forth around the trees and through the cedar groves.

This is a sanctuary for the animals and it is a sanctuary for me as well. I can leave the computer and cell phone on my desk and plunge into the soft and comforting trees. White pine, smooth barked beech (with no initials carved in their skins), strong red oak, many types of birch, cedar, maple, hemlock...all my friends. They welcome me wordlessly to their soft strength.

I don't know why, but I feel a connection with this place. I gain a peaceful energy from my time alone in the forest. My mind clears and the stress melts for an hour. The soft ground pushes life back up through my legs.

I don't know what I find, alone in the woods. Maybe it's me I find. Whatever is found is certainly a treasure that I value above all the asphalt I've wheeled beneath my feet through the years.

Take my advice. Go out now and find a park or a lonely wood and see what you can find.

Running With Buddy

Introduction:

One December I brought home a sad little bundle of fur from a business trip to Tennessee. He was so small and quiet that I had him in a small soft-sided pet carrying bag under the seat and no one even knew. This fur ball was to become my favorite running buddy. He is a professional friend, and he is very good at his job!

No body loves to run more than my puppy.

He hangs back on the up-hills. His little legs can't eat up the ground as fast as my long stride, but on the down-hills he blows by me like a little, furry, black and white cruise missile.

His pace is incredibly smooth and efficient. He hugs the ground; ears back for speed and no wasted effort.

His name is Buddy. He's less than three months old.

Before you call the SPCA to report me, he loves to trot a short $\frac{3}{4}$ mile trail loop with me. He beats me back every time. He's not even breathing hard. He's definitely designed for it. I think he likes it. I stop and let him do his doggy things if he wants. I'm very relaxed in my parenting style.

I'm not dragging him on a leash. He's unclipped and free to quit at any point, but he doesn't. He knows the trail loop. He knows where he is in relation to home.

He dogs me on the way out, staying close on my heels. Then, when we turn the corner to head back on a narrow and winding downhill section, he turns on the jets. He knows he's heading back. He cuts the corners on the trail and leads me in.

He's a Border Collie and you can tell he's bred for heeling. I'm like a giant lost sheep that he's leading home. He doesn't sprint and zigzag like a Labrador, crashing around the woods in exuberant lunges. He runs. He keeps a steady pace and conserves his energy. He keeps to the trail and is never more than two or three paces ahead or behind me.

He has a beautiful stride. No wasted effort. He doesn't look like he's running. He 'flows' or 'rolls' over the ground with very little vertical pitch.

He is extremely agile. He has learned how to get over the fallen tree trunks that block the trail. He times his hurdles just right and uses his momentum to easily vault obstacles that are as tall as he is. He takes them in stride, not disrupting his pace. Like an Olympic hurdler. He flows over them like water.

He's an inspiration to me. He's my running Buddy. Running just looks like a natural act for him. In contrast, there are few humans who make running look like a natural act. Many, (myself included), look decidedly unnatural, like they are fighting it, making their bodies do something that they weren't designed for. Not Buddy. He looks good.

It's a striking contrast. It has taken many years of physical and mental machination for me to experience the 'joy' of running. For this little fuzzball, he was born with it. He doesn't run to lose weight. He doesn't run to get in shape. He doesn't run to relieve stress. He doesn't race. He runs because it's his nature. It's what he does. He came into existence with a love of running.

He dreams about running. How many of us can say that? (Aside from that recurring nightmare where you show up for the marathon but have forgotten your shoes?)

This running dog has even affected my non-running wife. When she takes him for walks now, on the same loop, he pulls at the leash and wants to jog. Especially so when she turns the corner and heads back. She can't keep up with him. He can't understand why she just won't jog a little. In his world view, why the heck would anyone want to walk?

I can't imagine what he's going to be like when he grows up. How are my paltry 10k jogs going to satisfy him? He's just a puppy and he's already got more gears than I do. I guess he'll just have to wait for me to catch up. I can picture him as a two year old sitting in the trail ahead looking back with pity on my plodding.

Like all new babies, he has begun to show glimpses of the adult to come. He is very much changed from the tiny fur ball that I carried back on the plane with me in a little bag. A month later you couldn't fit half of this dog in that bag!

I didn't get the puppy to have a running partner. I got a puppy for my kids. It is coincidentally fortunate for both him and me to have this thing in common; a love of running. We'll take it one day at a time and see how it goes. I'm not going to push him into any distance until he grows up. Maybe he can be trained to push me out of bed for my long runs on Sunday morning when it's cold and forbidding out. A warm tongue to the face in the pre-dawn hours?

This is a great new chapter for me. He's inspirational to observe in motion. He can change my attitude. Like many of you, I think too much about the mechanics, the purpose and the meaning of running. He sets an enviable example with a pure, guileless, unthinking and unencumbered approach to the action of running.

This, in conclusion, brings us to my advice to you today. The next time you go out for a run, run like a dog. Approach your run like it is something in your nature that you were born to do. Flow over the ground with an easy, unthinking and

natural stride. Enjoy it for what it is and not what your over-sized brain reads into it.

And when you return, you can dream sweet dreams of herding fat, happy sheep in a bucolic land where to live is to run

.

Running with Buddy – Part 2

Introduction:

This is the follow up to my original story about Buddy as a puppy. The little puppy became a wonderful dog. He still loves to run. He's a smart, loving and a genuinely good dog. He's a good friend and a wonderful running accomplice. He and I share our runs in the woods. He drinks from my water bottle when we stop. He cuts in front of me and slows down when he's tired. He runs far ahead and laughs at me, looking strong and proud astride the trail.

People undoubtedly think me addled as I trot along talking to Buddy. "Move it fur-but! You're not going to make any friends standing in the middle of the trail!"

A year later

Snow flies as he skitters around a corner, haunches slipping sideways on the ice, front paws pawing for purchase. He turns ninety degrees in midair to follow an old set of footprints off at a tangent.

"C'mon Boo!" I yell, breaking his reverie briefly. He stops and looks back at me. Tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, grinning. His breath comes in steamy plumes in the winter woods. He seems to be saying, "C'mon yourself, old man, lets go!"

My trail shoes struggle with the 3-4 inches of fresh powder overlying an inch or two of ice and petrified footprints. The fresh snow makes it hard to figure out where it's safe to plant your foot. I'm doing my best to avoid a highly kinetic human-ground interaction, (if you know what I mean).

He doesn't care. He's got four wheel drive. Every once in a while he'll loose it on a corner and scramble sideway to catch himself. He's so low to the ground he doesn't have the same issue with balance and gravity that I do.

He's been cooped up all day in the house. The kids treat him like a lap dog. I find them lying on the couch like a big kid-dog fur ball watching TV. He's a working dog. He's designed to be outside running.

I had him all programmed for the invisible fence until the neighbor's black lab decided to liberate him. Now I can only let him out if I've got time to chase him around the neighborhood. The good news is that the neighbor bought an invisible fence too so now we are going to figure out how to wire both yards together so that they can play and still stay out of the road. We'll see to that when the snow melts.

Keeping him in the house when he wants to be outside is a pain. He's a herding dog. He follows me around whenever I get up keeping just in front of me on the off chance I might make a break for a door.

But when he gets out with me in the fresh snow he's very happy. I'm pretty happy too to be running again after six months struggle with the smashed patella tendon. I'm slow, but I'm doing it. Today I run him on the old loop up the hill to the AT&T tower down into the conservation land and around the pond.

I've been cutting this loop short by a mile or so because of the deep snow and the bugged knee. This will be my first time to stretch it out to the full 10k. The conservationists have chased off the snowmobiles. Which I guess is a good thing for conservation, but I'd rather run on a packed snowmobile path than slog through knee deep snow. Snow shoes and cross country skis just don't create the wide, level, packed path that the Skidoos do.

First we had a couple feet of drifting snow. Then we had a warm spell, followed by a cold snap that produced slick, lumpy ice on the trail. Today we have 3-4 inches of fresh powder. This gives enough traction for Buddy and me to head out and tear it up a little.

I'm slow. I ran a 20 mile race on Saturday and my hamstrings are a little angry. When we ran together out here last spring, he was tired coming back the last few miles. Not today. He's got more energy than a Saturn Rocket. A black and white fire ball loping down the trail and looking over his shoulder laughing at me like, "Isn't this great?"

When he was a puppy I trained him to stop before the one road we have to cross and wait to be leashed. He's impatient. He wants to get going and bites at the lead. I heel him on the road. He's pretty good at heeling. He doesn't try to trip or dart, but he does pull too much. I have him sit and wait until I give the release word before we cross. I want him to respect the cars.

Unfortunately he thinks trucks, cars, people on bikes, anything moving or making noise must be some kind of sheep that needs to be herded back to the barn. I definitely don't want to let him out in the snow because he thinks the snowplows need to be herded. He's not stupid, just genetically designed to herd. Working dogs need to work.

He won't go out on the frozen pond ice with me; he doesn't think that is a very smart thing to do. Likewise, when I go in the pool in the summer he tries to 'save' me. Running around the edge barking madly, "What are you daft man? Get out of the water!" Then eventually his loyalty overcomes his outrage and he dives in to drag me out.

One thing he does like to do is run. Man, can he move. I think the neighbor's Lab is losing weight from all the running he has to do to catch up with Buddy.

The Sheltie down the street can't hold a candle to him and gets outflanked at each turn. I certainly can't catch him anymore.

He spent all morning either sitting in a chair looking wistfully out the window at the snow or sitting at the front door looking at me and moaning. Every once in a while he'll exhale in a great sigh. It is like he is saying "Woe is me. All that pretty fresh snow and I'm cooped up in here..." Like some long suffering grandmother. What a pain!

Eventually I'll break for lunch and head upstairs. He'll follow me, jumping up on the bed to lie with his big fuzzy head on my pillow and watch. When I put on my fleece, he gets excited and can barely contain his enthusiasm. One of the 'key' words in his life is "run", as in "Hey Buddy, want to go for a run?"

He runs like a wild palomino, loping like a wolf. He still stays to the trail and is a well disciplined runner, but he's usually a couple hundred yards ahead stopping every once in a while to impatiently wait for me to catch up. That's ok champ. Keep it up. I'm getting stronger. When this snow melts, after the marathon, I'm going to hit the track and get some speed back, and then we'll see who's laughing at whom!

Clubbing it in the summer

Introduction:

This is a piece I wrote as a form of public service announcement for running clubs everywhere. I had just taken on a leadership role within my club and with the zeal of new endeavors this precipitated a burst of social activity.

You need to get some help.

Is your family not supportive of your running? Do the people at work think you're nuts? Are your long runs long and lonely?

Who do you share your successes, your failures, your aches and pains with? Have you got no one to talk to except the dog? Is there no one to challenge you? Is there no one to shame you out of bed for that morning run?

You need to get some help! Lucky for you help is at hand. There are plenty of other poor restless souls like you in the world. There are even some close by if you know where to look.

Like all serious social disorders, an inexplicable passion for running has its support groups. They are a loosely knit cabal of codependents and enablers euphemistically referred to as "Running Clubs".

Do you know the real difference between 'doing something stupid' and 'a sport'? When you can get ten others to do it with you, and get someone else to watch, it's a sport.

You can see the difference between, "Hey, I'm going to go run around in the woods for 25 minutes, possibly falling down, probably hurting myself, and definitely throwing up," and "The athletes gave their all today at the Bramble Bush Trail Run."

Why would I join a club? When it comes to running and competing, I'm a loner. The biggest thing that I get out of my runs is the chance to be alone with myself, in my head and sort things out. I'm not anti-social, I'm introspective. Running brings me clarity.

Even so, there are plenty of times when I need the energy of others to pull and push me along. No man (or woman) is an island. I love being in a running club and having running friends. In the process I've made some great friends that I would never have otherwise met.

Everyone joins a club for a different reason. In the club everyone contributes something and everyone takes something away. In the process the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Over the summer we've had some fun with running in our club. More importantly, we've got some folks involved who otherwise would have stayed home.

You need to mix it up with some traditional events and some quirky ideas. You have to mix it up to get every one involved. Let me tell you about four events we have. Maybe you can use as inspiration in your club to get some folks involved.

The first event we had wasn't really a separate event as much as it was a variation of a scheduled event. We have weekly club runs on Sunday mornings. In the summertime attendance tends to fall off, due to vacations and warm weather apathy.

We created a variant of the club run called the Hawaiian shirt run. Simply put, for this particular Sunday morning run we were required to wear Hawaiian shirts. By this simple device, we got a couple people we hadn't seen for awhile to come out with us. It appealed to their sense of humor.

Picture a group of people festooned with pineapple and flamingo prints trotting through the center of a small New England town at 8:30 AM on Sunday morning. We had people yelling at us from passing cars. We turned heads. We got some good photos and had some fun.

If your club is going to attempt the Hawaiian shirt run, make sure you have 40% extra shirts to give people when they get there, because (unbelievably) not everyone has a Hawaiian shirt. Also, some people are afraid to wear them in public, and will 'forget' to bring them. Be willing to take some cat calls and good natured abuse from the locals.

The second neat thing that we did this summer was to have a "dog run". Again, it is something a little different, and we got some people out with their 'best friends'. Dogs have social needs too. It kills two birds with one stone; you get to exercise the dog and get a run in.

The plot for the dog run is to meet somewhere dog friendly on a chosen morning and go for a run with your four legged running buddies. Preferably you should find a place where you can let them off the leash without anyone getting mad, lost or hurt. Some place with water for the hunting dogs to wallow in is a plus.

The dogs loved it. They ran hard and played with each other while we two legged runners got an easy trail run in. My Buddy slept well that day. It was something different that added some interest, activity and pulse in the club. This is one we will definitely do more often.

The third event we have been doing for years. It is a local 'race series'. This is a scheduled race that runs every Thursday night during the summer.

They have age groups and keep a running (cumulative) point count for the whole season. In this way attendance is rewarded and the same crew of people shows up every week.

This is good for the club because it gives a few competitive members who would otherwise be sitting around something to do every week. It gives us something to announce each week and that keeps the chatter level up, ensuring communication channels stay open.

The other great thing about this race series is that someone else organizes it. Someone else does all the work and we get to use it to socialize and compete. It provides another anchor for the club without too much effort (besides running the race).

The final event we had was a convergence on a local 5k for the Fourth of July. This was a little, local race held on the morning of the Fourth.

The agenda here is to get as many club members as you can to run the same race. If everything works out it can create quite a sense of 'being part of something'.

We ended up fielding 25 runners out of a field of a couple hundred. Many of us wore club singlets, so we looked like an invading army. Three of our ladies got some hardware! I think it gave everyone pride of participation to be a member when so many people showed up for the same event.

In a big race, we might have been lost in the crowd, but here we were an invading force and made a small statement. It was cool, and it took very little coordination; just a little communication.

When I think of running I think of all the lonely miles I've plodded through in the cold and rain, the endless rounds on the track and the stoic, solitary marathons. Now, I also think of the partnership, the comradery, the common goals and the fun.

What good is it to be in the arena, with the blood, sweat and toil, if you can't share it with someone at the end of the day?

My advice to you is to get some help. Go find a club of like-minded individuals to share your escapades with. Your efforts will come back to you tenfold.

If you're already engaged in a club; mix it up a little. Like any relationship, you need to keep it interesting. Do something different and fun to keep it fresh.

Either way, you'll be surprised how much you reap from this social sowing.

The curse of the runner's body

Introduction

Athletes come in all shapes and sizes. What makes you an athlete is what lies between your ears and in your heart. Courage, focus and determination are not solely the purview of the beautiful people.

It's easy to become discouraged when you look in the mirror and realize that for all your hard work, God and nature had other plans for your physique. I've found that the rewards of personal excellence are great even when personal excellence equates to relative mediocrity!

It isn't always like they show you in the magazines!

The cover of the running magazine always has some beautiful happy person running. They have strong, sinewy, healthy bodies. They are the picture of vibrancy and health.

Through the process of running I have developed a self-image in my mind that somehow I look like that. Then reality rudely intrudes on my introspective musings.

Reading my email tonight I got the pictures from the 20 miler I raced a couple weeks back. I was excited by the surprise. Everyone loves to see new pictures of themselves. It was like an unexpected gift arriving in the mail.

I had a pretty good race. I stayed within my goal pace, ran hard and finished fairly well. In my mind's eye I could see the pictures. I saw myself strong and powerful, striding towards the finish in triumphant victory. I saw a strong, sinewy athlete.

I hastily clicked on the thumbnails, prepared to revel in my awesomeness. I was looking forward to reinforcing that 'runner' self image.

I was shocked. I opened the photos only to be confronted by the image of some chubby old guy who is obviously in a lot of pain. Who the hell is that? That can't be me...

Eight months of training. Careful and studious, I rehabbed my injured tendons from zero to fifty miles a week. I followed all the rules. I used all the knowledge I've gained from the hundreds of bib numbers hanging in my laundry room. I took my time. I did the exercises and the stretches. I worked off 30 or more extra pounds.

What's the net result? "Chubby Old Guy".

At around mile sixteen in that race I was chatting with another runner and he said, "So, you're a Clydesdale?"

"No," I replied, "But, Thanks for noticing."

"Umm, no, it's just that you have a 'big frame'"

Sheesh! Talk about your inspirational moments!

I joke with people about how, according to the official US government weight charts, I am an officially 'obese' qualified marathoner. Yes sir, it's true. The government says I'm fat. I enjoy the irony in this.

Which brings me to my point: The curse of runner's body. Running is a very specific exercise and really does not produce a great physique. (I'm talking about long distance running, not those really good-looking sprinters.)

Don't get me wrong. Running definitely makes you look better. For one thing, I love the hard wind-burned look my face gets at the end of the early spring training season. It's a rugged outdoors glow.

It cannot be disputed that running is a great way to lose weight. You can burn a lot of calories. If I'm training for a marathon, the miles take a good 20 pounds off my frame, but my body shape jealously clings to that little beer gut I've always sported. There is some belt tightening, but not much classic sculpting.

When we run, the message we send to our bodies day in and day out is that we want to go far and fast using our legs. Our bodies are happy to accommodate. I think one conclusion my body makes in response is that there's no real need for any upper body mass. In fact it's just more baggage to carry around. It's a waste. Having a massive, well toned, upper body works against you in a long race. If you don't do something to work out your top-side it will slowly atrophy to support your running.

Take a look around at your next race. You're not going to see too many classic 'Greek God' type physiques. Running doesn't promote large biceps, shoulders or massive pectorals that look good on the beach. The elites for the men are mostly little scrawny guys. The elite American marathoners for men are in the 135 – 145 pound range. For the women, let's be gentle and say they are mostly 'compact'.

To use my liberal arts education well I'll put it as follows; the only six-pack abs that I got running was from Budweiser, and the Greek God I most resemble is Bacchus.

One of the great fallacies that we all secretly believe is that running is a great weight loss activity, or even worse, that running is a fat burning activity. It is, but it's not magic. The truth is that you don't start burning fat until you burn off all the

free carbohydrates in your body. Depending on what kind of shape you're in and how hard you work out, you probably won't cross this barrier on most of your runs. For me, if I'm in shape and I'm just running my resting pace, I'm not going to start dipping into the fat stores until after 90 minutes of moving forward. Plus, if I'm sipping sports drink, or kicked off the run by inhaling a energy bar, it may never happen!

As wise people say it's calories in vs. calories out. You burn the net calories used in moving forward, but after awhile you get the training effect and just running isn't that much of an effort. Where I'm at today, I'm probably only using a hundred calories a mile. At the end of one of my base five-mile runs, what have I really burned? The equivalent large apple!

To be sure, a five hundred calorie swing every day adds up, but how many of you, like me, use that five-miler as justification to have that extra cookie, (or two...or four)? It's a wash. Unless you're putting in some significant miles or effort, running isn't a fat reduction exercise. In simple terms, the beer belly and the hips are going to be the last place your body goes for fuel. You'll have exhausted everything else first. That's just how we're designed.

It's like the camel's hump. It may deflate in times of scarcity, but it will fill back up when you relax at the oasis. Those fat reserves are for emergencies; long winters and mammoth hunts, not a local 5k.

When we get injured and have to lay off for a couple weeks or months do we curtail our consumption? No, of course not! We keep sucking down 8000 calories a day because, gosh darn-it, we're marathoners and we can always run those calories off!

In the end we're all stuck with our runner's body. It's not going to change, no matter how many miles we put in and how hard we train. The size may change, but the envelope is ours to keep. (Short of surgery)

What's important is that we feel young and strong and healthy when we're powering through the finish line or cruising the back roads around town. I feel good about myself. I feel my inner Greek God.

I see that flash of youth behind the tired eyes in the mirror and that makes it worth it to me. We are not going gently into that dark night, right? We're not one of those flaccid behemoths they show waddling around on CNN when talk turns to the 'obesity crisis'.

Who says there is a right and wrong physique anyhow? We don't have to play into the hands of the body image industry with their silly weight loss and exercise machine infomercials. We have found the ultimate inner freedom. We are runners.

Truthfully we run for ourselves. It's an inherently narcissistic activity. Long miles alone on the trail and road are necessarily introspective.

My favorite self-image is on a coffee mug that my sister had made for my fortieth birthday. It shows me just after finishing the Eastern States 20 miler. I remember the race. I went out way too fast. I started to hit the wall in that long stretch over the bridge into Salisbury after mile 18. I was trying to break my PR and gave it everything I had in the last miles as the wheels were coming off.

The picture shows me bent over, struggling for breath, trying to decide if I'm going to throw up or pass out. There is, in the photo, strength behind the pain of the moment. It's the mental picture of that strength that I choose to carry with me as my self-image, not the chubby old guy.

As you're running today, close your eyes and picture your own beautiful and strong self striding across the cover of that glossy running magazine. That should bring a smile to your face. While you're at it, go lift some weights; you're looking a little scrawny.

Running and the art of motorcycle maintenance

Introduction:

I wrote this piece to give myself patience during the frustrating down time of my broken knee. Everyone else was running and I was stuck in the garage, unable to move. You have to convince yourself to take a long term view of your life and running if you expect to weather the rough patches.

I used the metaphor of my old motorcycle and the great joys it has given me over the years to make the point.

If you want to go fast, sometimes you need to change the oil.

On a recent Sunday morning, the club that I am a member of had an event. It consisted of a long bicycle ride out to a member's lake house for brunch and a swim. In the course of the day I learned something about running and the art of motorcycle maintenance.

Since I had been forbidden to abuse my knee while it strove to heal itself, I decided I'd take my old motorcycle for ride instead. I'd join them for a swim and get a nice long ride in the countryside with my beloved old friend, Honda.

As the peloton of fit, healthy club-mates set off on their morning grind, I swung into the rural two-lane with a satisfying down shift and a roar.

My motorcycle and my running are both things that I've clung to since my youth. I started riding a motorcycle around the same time I started running. They are both treasured possessions.

I started running 'seriously' in high school (25 years ago) as a way to get into shape for wrestling season. Wrestling was my real sport. I had an undistinguished two-year career on the varsity cross country team. I was the 5th man on a 5 man team. Slow and steady (nothing has changed). I learned some of the basics of training and racing.

The only events of any note I remember were; 1. Pulling an Achilles at a meet, 2. Hitting the wall spectacularly (with less than 100 yards to go I hyper-ventilated and five people passed me), and 3. Falling down in a mud hole at the league championships. I got lots of warm praise for finishing the race covered head-to-toe with muck, like a human caramel apple.

This was not Eugene, Oregon. This was the middle of the pack in the small New England Prep-Private league.

It never occurred to me at the time that running would be the sport I'd carry forward later in life. Wrestling proved hard to carry forward as a recreational pastime. Can you imagine trying to organize a group of 40-somethings to go out for a Sunday morning 'fun wrestle'? Actually, I think that may be illegal in Massachusetts; or it used to be!

Running is much more portable in life. I always ran. Not well, but I knew it was there when I needed it. At the same time, I always rode a motorcycle. I rode all through high school and college. It was part of how I defined myself as running is now.

We always had a minibike around the house when I was growing up. Those single-gear models with a throttle, a brake and a 3 ½ horse power Briggs and Stratton lawn mower engine for propulsion.

My Dad taught me to ride by tying a rope to the back of the minibike so that he could haul the whole works down if I was headed for trouble. I think I was nine or ten years old.

By the time I got to be a pre-teen I had a dirt bike. My friends and I ranged far and wide over the trails and power lines of then rural Groton. Ironically enough we tore up those same trails that, as a runner, I hate to see motorized vehicles on now.

I loved riding from the start. It gave me a sense of power, a sense of control and a sense of freedom in my world. No matter what was happening in my life, when I cranked back the throttle and threw dirt in the air, I was free.

It was no surprise that when I graduated from college one of the first things I wanted was a new bike. I had patched up my old CB350 so many times that it didn't run right anymore.

Those of you who are old enough to have been watching TV in 1984 may remember the commercial. The scene opened on a drag racing track. A leather-clad, helmeted rider was 'smoking' the back tire of a V65 Magna. The light turned green and man/machine surged forward in roaring acceleration. In a flash they were gone. The scene faded and the voice over said, "Need we say more?" It was the fastest ¼ mile of any production motorcycle in the world in 1984.

I went out and got one of those scary-fast V4-engine-humping machines. My wife had to sign the loan papers because, at 22, and a new graduate, I had no credit.

Twenty years later, that was the same machine I mounted for a country ride.

Since I was ten years old I've been running and riding. There are strong parallels. When I run, when I am in shape, I feel that same freedom on the trail and road, that same self possessed power of controlled energy. When I have a

bad day I can go for a long trail run and everything falls into place. When the mood strikes me I can 'open it up' and throw dirt to the wind.

When I toss on the helmet, zip up the leather and roar onto the highway I am master of something; something that not everybody can do. I am somehow special, the power of the machine flows into me. I pull back the throttle. Heads turn. I am (to myself) a little god-like.

When I hit the track and pound out miles to qualify for Boston, I'm also doing something that not everybody can do. The power of my internal machine transcends the ordinary.

In both cases, when I engage, nothing else matters, for that moment, in that moment, I am untouchable.

The old motorcycle felt fragile Sunday morning. The front brakes were sticking. The tail pipe had developed a pin-hole leak from road salt pitting. The clutch was very low. The battery was so weak that I had to jump it.

I figured that, like my old body, after a few miles it would warm up. The kinks would work out and it would be as it always was. Soon I would be recapturing my youth when I used to race corvettes on interstate 495 at more the twice the legal speed limit (no kidding! Sometimes I wonder how I lived this long!)

Then she gave out. (Of course it's a 'she') The battery wouldn't take any more. I had to backtrack with my truck to haul her home.

Like my broken knee, my old motorcycle needs some TLC. This winter I'll have to strip her down on fix her up. I think I owe her that after 20 years of uncomplaining service. I love that old bike like an old war buddy.

It got me thinking about how I've probably been riding my old body too hard. I guess I owe it some TLC too. Perhaps this winter I'll strip my running down and see if I can fix it up. Maybe I can rub the pits out of my personal chrome. Maybe, with a little patience and TLC, I can coax some more performance from this old power plant.

I don't ride much anymore. The kids and the career make it hard to get out. However, in a couple years things will be different and I'll be able to take it out of the garage and enjoy its life-affirming power. Who knows? If I take care of it, I might be able to ride comfortably into my old age. Not as fast, but still living in the essence of the thing.

How about you? Have you expected too much from your machine? Have you ridden it hard for decades and not taken care of it? Is it time for you to show a little appreciation for all the miles?

It's probably time for some TLC.

Polyethylene Idolatry

Introduction:

As runners we have the interesting problem of what to do when nature calls. The act of running typically precipitates digestive processes that can be downright inconvenient.

This piece was never published, but I did get a very nice, personal rejection letter from one magazine editor. It is my tongue in cheek manifesto for the lowly, but inspirational porta-potty.

Admit it, you like Porta-potties!

I have a confession to make: I like Porta-potties. I really like them. Not in a strange, twisted, fetish way, but, rather the congenial way you like old friends with whom you've been through much and have shared personal triumphs and tragedies. As a runner I have been conditioned to like them. Where the general populace would see a distasteful, perhaps odiferous repose, I see great joy.

Many times in my running life that ubiquitous sky-blue hut has appeared at just the right moment, like an oasis in the desert appears for a poor, crawling, dust-sotted soul dying of thirst. Now, you may pooh-pooh my strong emotional attachment to inanimate objects, especially these closets of discretion, but, as a runner I have been conditioned. The same way Pavlov got dogs to drool and B.F. Skinner taught pigeons to play ping pong. The positive reinforcement of necessity and reprieve has bent my psyche towards adoration. It's another running thing, like bloody nipples and black toenails, which sets us apart in our strangeness from the non-running public.

I had no feelings about them one way or the other until I started training for and running marathons. Three hour training runs at odd hours tend to overlap adversely with your body's natural cycles. Any mid-packer who has spent time on the road has had similar experiences. Many times, deep into a long morning slog, I would find myself regretting the previous nights dinner. Shuffling alone in the dawn of suburbia I would begin to rue the lack of self control and foresight in not being able to moderate my evening repast in anticipation of the morning 20 miler.

In these times of misfortune, as I ran alone in the discomfiture of pending natural disaster, often a glorious vision would materialize on the horizon. At some secluded construction site, amid the stacked 2X4's and tar paper rolls, glowing like the Holy Grail, the portal of my salvation would perch.

Thus I was unburdened. I was saved the necessity of a side trip into the woods and saved the anguish of poison ivy and other ill-advised toiletries. I was set free to enjoy the rest of my circuit.

After a host of similar episodes over the years, I became conditioned. Now I'm on the look out for them. My wife and kids have had to get used to another running induced personality quirk. Where others might recoil with injured sensibilities and say, "I'll wait", I react with out-of-place glee at a sighting; "Look! A porta-potty!" I mentally file its position and attitude for later, when I might need it.

Over the years I began to be always on the lookout for those stand-alone, compact rooms of rest. Riding the bike, driving in the car, ranging all over my environs I cataloged their locations. I began to strategically plan my long runs around these points of tactical necessity. I began to hunt them in their lairs, seeing where I could easily flush one out when required.

I learned where to track the free-range variety. Construction sites are a good bet. Here amid the bulldozers and debris, their population peaks and they lie accessible, if not welcoming. New homes, road work or anyplace workers congregate is a good bet. You'll also find them perched in public parks and in the aftermath of festivals and community events. Normally shy, solitary creatures, they will gather together in great numbers for an outdoor concert or football game.

Only once have I been turned away, locked out or chased off. That was when the town of Hopkinton decided to build a new high school. What were they thinking putting a row of blue huts on that hallowed ground in late March? They had unknowingly set out a honeyed trap. It wasn't long before the construction workers realized that they would have to fence off and padlock these if they wanted to read their newspapers in peace. It created a comical juxtaposition of burly, beer-bellied, denim wearing townies and effete spandex-clad sportos in heated argument over the propriety of the seats.

There is something inherently clandestine in the nature of using them. They are everywhere, their purpose is not in dispute, the biological need is similarly undeniable, yet there is a question as to the right. It becomes a battleground over private property versus basic human digestive rights. Is our use of the rotomolded commode an act of theft, or vandalism, or is it a bold assertion of squatters' rights?

Fascinated and disturbed by my growing amorous relationship with these salons of solitude, I did some research. According to the PSIA (Portable Sanitation Association International) it is a 1.5 billion dollar industry with 1.4 million units serviced by some 10 thousand trucks worldwide.

As it turns out, porta-johns have been around as long as construction has. In the old days they were made out of plywood and metal. With the innovation in the 70's of Polyethylene, the industry took off. If you're interested you can attend the upcoming PSIA trade show in Dallas and get the straight poop, so to speak, on all the new and innovative things they are doing.

One of the more interesting things is that, like any consumer product, the humble porta-john comes in a mind numbing variety. We've all seen the basic units and the basic handicapped accessible units for the wheel chair competitors. There are many other types. There are high-end, posh, paneled suites with golden fixtures. One might suppose these are for the convenience of visiting sheiks and foreign dignitaries. There are situation dependent manifestations, like the camouflaged 'Hunter's Special', or the extremely portable special for high-rise construction.

They are constructed mostly out of polyethylene plastic, which is lightweight, cheap and stubbornly resists most efforts at vandalism. One disquieting fact is that, believe it or not, they are flammable. I can't imagine coming to a more awful end than to be barbecued alive in the handy-house.

I think the industry should consider making a 'runners special'. It could have a place to hang your extra pair of shoes or a Gu dispenser or an LED showing how much time to the gun. It would be festooned with tableaus of Bill Rodgers breaking the tape or Joan Benoit entering the stadium. I think we deserve some recognition for our 'frequent flyer' status.

Ever wonder just how many are deployed at big events? When the pope visited Toronto, an industry consortium provided 8 thousand huts for the event. This dwarfs the paltry 471 that the BAA provides at Boston to keep the faithful from disfiguring the shrubbery in Hopkinton.

If you do the math, that comes out to a potty-index of 42.46 runners per repository. This means at a big marathon you're sharing that facility with somewhere around 45 other folks. (Now you have something interesting to talk about next time you are standing in line.) Maybe races should post their potty-index with the race information so participants can gage their wait times and schedule accordingly. I've personally experienced the chaos that ensues when something in the supply chain breaks and the promised truckload of huts doesn't arrive for the day of a marathon. It's not pretty.

My pre-race ritual has always been to get in line, whether I think I need it or not, 30 minutes before the gun. Isn't that another great example of how the porta-john has influenced the runner's psychology? The way we have to make sure we time the magic moment just perfectly? It can't be too far before the start or we might have a mid-race crisis, but it can't be too late either or we'll miss the corral and the starting gun. Our whole race experience could hinge on this one logistical decision.

The industry does produce models that are air conditioned and heated, but we typically don't get those at our races. I know from experience that the extremes of seasonal weather can taint your closeted experience. There is nothing quite like being forced to use a house that has been baking in the hot sun all day. This even causes my favorable pre-disposition to falter. The cold is a factor as well. Where I live and race in New England, there is nothing like being the first person

to occupy a thin plastic shell early in the morning on a crisp January day when the mercury struggles in the single digits. One does well not to linger.

Beyond the challenges and facts, as a runner, I still like the humble porta-potty. I can't imagine our world without them. There is something comforting in their readiness to go anywhere, anytime and provision us on our fields of battle. We should all praise the porta-john. It is a democratic, 'every-man' institution, that mutely, uncomplaining, enables the running experience that we love.

Sleeping with the fishes

Introduction:

When I broke my knee and smashed my patella tendon in a car accident, I started cross training and it gave me fresh fodder for story telling. This story is the first of the cross training stories I wrote about swimming, lifting and biking.

Swimming was something I had never done seriously before. It's hard, and it's a great workout. As usual, my efforts leave me laughing at myself and still in the mid-pack, whether on the road or in the pool.

Cool in the pool

The warm summer sun burned high in the sky. The water was warm. I kept my eye on the tall water tower on a hill above the lake for reference as I churned along. I was pondering a triathlon and the town beach seemed like a good starting point. Then, out of the corner of my eye there was movement. I was startled. I was, after all, in the middle of the lake.

A woman passed me, swimming easily, kicking and digging with rhythmic robotics. I applied myself to the task, my ego tweaked. She motored away with no effort over the horizon.

That was when I realized that there is swimming and there is swimming...

The orthopedic surgeon has lost interest in me. He said he won't operate and (paraphrasing) 'I should just deal with it'. Goodbye fall racing season. Goodbye spring marathons. He says "Give it a few more months" and "It's a question of 'pain management'".

I can't sit around. It's just not possible. Being opportunistic and driven, I came up with a plan. I went and joined the gym. It's an old racquet club with a pool, cardio and weights. Here's my plan for the long New England Winter... Day One – Stationary bike. Day Two – Swimming. Day Three – lifting weights. Repeat. Once a week I'll attempt a short run just to gauge if it still hurts. The good news is that I've always wanted to cross train more, now I have to.

Sounds good, right? Well, in theory it is. The opportunity when you change training methods is that you have a learning curve. It takes awhile for your body to adapt, and until it does, it isn't all that much fun. Not because the effort is too hard, just the opposite. You have to pay your dues before you build a base that allows you to get a good (i.e. hard, satisfying) work out in.

I would normally go run for an hour. I'm comfortable with that. My body knows instinctively what pace equals the desired heart rate. It can be easy or hard, just as I want, and even the crappy days are satisfying. Now, put me on a stationary

bike and I struggle with trying to get my heart rate up without twisting my ankles off.

Then there's the pool.

The irony is that I always considered myself a strong swimmer. I started swimming when I was around 5 years old. My folks had beach front property on a lake and that's what we did. I always thought swimming was easy. I 'tested out' of swimming lessons. I was a certified SCUBA diver by 16. (By the way, runners make amazing snorklers due to our lung capacity)

I'm built like a sea lion, (except hairier). Don't tell anyone, but I've also inherited webbed toes from my Irish gene pool. I kid you not, the second and third toe on each of my size 12's are webbed together. Plus, I've got that egg-shaped torpedo thing going with plenty of adipose flotation pockets, if you know what I mean.

For all these advantages, I've never thought of swimming as exercise. I swam to enjoy the summer day, or to get to a hidden beach, or to relax, but never just to swim.

In preparing to enter the pool I had to fish around for the proper attire. First, there are the eyes. You can't swim in this pool without eye protection. It's got near-lethal levels of chlorine in it. If you attempted to open your eyes unprotected in this water you would spend the day looking like a dope fiend with conjunctivitis. I 'borrowed' my ten year old daughter's swim mask. I can't explain it, but it fit. She's a pool veteran from swimming lessons. She knows about eye-swimming safety and was gracious enough to lend a hand with my equipage.

Next I need ear plugs to keep the water out of my head. If I don't block the passages, I'll end up with my own little Venice sloshing around in the cochlear canals. I manage to find one ear plug. Evidently I lost the other one in the middle of the lake last summer. I guess it will work if I only rhythmic breathe in one direction.

Then there is the question of swimwear. I do own an official 'bathing suit', or, as my brother euphemistically refers to them; 'a grape smuggler'. Maybe if I spend more time with the French Canadians, I'll overcome this hesitance, but not today. I'm a few hundred laps away from wearing that in public, so I opt for the standard orange life-guardesque trunks. I'm ready for the pool.

In the pool at the club there is a coterie of serious swimmers churning away up and down the lanes. Swimming for them is obviously serious business.

I find an unoccupied lane, rinse out my kid goggles, stick in my one earplug and lower my baggy trunks into the pool. I begin to swim freestyle, watching the other swimmers as they pass nearby to see if there are some evident secrets to be learned.

One thing I noticed was that they were all executing fluid flip-turns at the ends to propel themselves down the other way seamlessly. I gave it a try and whacked my heels on the cement. I decided I would just pause at the ends, like a beginner runner, walking the water stops.

Another thing I noticed was that they used their legs. They kicked a lot. It was then that I came to the realization, for the first time in my 42 years on this planet, that I had been swimming my whole life without using my legs. I mean, I used them for balance and as a rudder but not for propulsion. In a flash it came to me that this was why my shoulders were the first to tire on long swims.

With this startling revelation I began to try to kick. It turns out that kicking while you are swimming is like rubbing your tummy and patting your head at the same time, it requires some rewiring of your whole swim mechanics. It also raises the actual exercise level through the roof. I found myself gasping for breath and my heart rate soaring, and I thought to myself, "Cool! This has potential!"

Upon further inspection I found that I was trying to kick with my toes in the flex position which is basically like dragging an anchor. Once I fixed that and started to get the rhythm back it started to go... well... swimmingly.

That first day I managed to move back and forth in a reasonably swim-like fashion for 20 minutes. Of course there was substantial pausing and near drowning episodes, but all in all a successful first outing. When I left the club, to my astonishment, I was still perspiring from the effort. As an exercise, this swimming stuff has potential.

I am now happily on that beginner-learning curve where every session brings new discoveries and gains are made in leaps and bounds. I remember the same when training for my first marathon and there was that day I ran farther than I had ever run before in my life, and every subsequent weekend was a personal record of some sort. It was a time of unique reward and fulfillment.

I'm sure I'll be doing pool speed-work and long-swims before the month is out, although I'm not quite sure how I'll work in some hills.

I have found this freshness of challenge out of necessity, but you don't have to be so pig-headed. Do yourself a big favor this winter and head for the pool a couple times a week. Go into it with the right attitude. Give yourself enough time to work through the awkwardness and find your pace. Soon you'll be sharing the swimmer's high.

Muscle Madness

Introduction:

This piece also came out of my rehabilitation phase when I broke my knee.

The gym has always been a surreal place for most people to go. It is haunted by full-time gym rats who can be very scary to share the equipment with. Whenever I see people acting too seriously about themselves it make me want to mock them!

One of my favorite writers is humorist Dave Barry. He announced that he would no longer publish his weekly column about the same time I began writing this piece. I wrote this in the spirit of fan worship, mimicking his flow and wit as best I could.

You have to have a sense of humor about it!

I want to go on record right now, I'm not just a lumpy 42 year old guy any more; I'm a manly, body-building, weight lifter! I have been for over a month. That's when I joined the health club. It's paying off already; I can hold the remote aloft clicking at a full 33 channels per second for almost 15 minutes without a break. Just ask my wife.

I joined this particular health club after extensive analysis which involved seeing which club had the most out of shape patrons. No sense starting with a handicap. My new club is nothing but tottering retirees and house-frau Jenny Craig drop outs.

I'm a serious body builder. I don't play around with that Nautilus machine stuff. I pump iron. As a famous California politician says; "Ze Nautilus is for Girly Men!" I must say that this is one of the few things Senator Dianne Feinstein and I agree on.

Like all men floundering in that gray area between youth and Florida, I'm constantly on the lookout for activities that turn back the clock. In this case, I would guess that pumping iron turns back the clock to "little boy". Let's face it; you don't have to scratch the surface of most men very deeply to find a little boy. (Especially if you draw blood)

Why do think guys like weight lifting? Pumping iron has all the elements of a guy sport. First of all, you can do it either before or after drinking beer. Second, you can wear clothes that you've slept in. Third, there is lots of grunting and brief episodes of exertion. Finally, those big metal plates really make great guy-type clanging noises. If you could throw in some spitting and a car crash it would be darn near perfect.

My best weight lifting 'move' is not the bench press or the bicep curl; it's the 'spot'. Spotting is when you help some real weight lifter finish his or her 'set' by applying a gentle counter-gravity force to the bar. I'm a spot artiste. I make them work and scream for that last push. Some days I don't lift any actual 'weights', I just preen in the mirror and spot people.

The best thing about lifting is that it doesn't waste time with any energy-sapping so called 'aerobic' activity. You sit around for awhile – you heave the weight – you sit around some more. It closely simulates what the male has to contend with in his wild environment, what with the stuck jar lids and stubborn window jams.

Like most male activities, and ladies, you'll surely agree with me on this point, it consists of a small amount of violent activity surrounded by a lot of sitting around and posturing.

One of those things I've always wanted to do, but haven't had the time, was to strength train. All the running pundits recommend it. 80% of runners think it's a great idea, according to a survey I just made up to support my argument. But, do you ever see any of these skinny little runners at the gym? Nope.

Having already joined the club, and not being able to run a lot, (with the dodgy knee), I was presented with that excellent opportunity to do that strength training that everyone is always preaching about.

Here's a revelation for you; when these folks talk about strength training they are talking about something different. They mean a few lunges and a roll-around with the big rubber ball. When I talk about strength training, I go old school – weight lifting.

Those of you who played football or were on the wrestling team know what I'm talking about. You lifted for pure mano-a-mano power. It is a simple, pure and honest exercise. The Romans did it in their spas. It's as natural to humans as running.

I'm not a weight lifting virgin. When I was in my 20's I had a job within walking distance to a gym and used to go over every lunch and lift. At one point my workouts coincided with a broken jaw from blocking a slap-shot with my face in hockey. With the combination of the liquid diet from having my jaw wired and lifting consistently, there was a span of a couple weeks where I was lean and buffed out...In a way.

I had the privilege of working with a guy who was a professional body builder. You know those guys who get up on stage and pose? And, you know what? It's just like running or any other sport, you are either genetically inclined or your destined for mediocrity. It doesn't matter how much you lift, if you've got a 'dorky' body type, it's not going to change. You can get bigger and stronger, but you'll still be odd shaped body type 'dork'.

Like any other sport it has its terminology, technique and rules. I was lucky to work out with this guy because he showed me how to do it right. How to lift clean, isolate the muscles you're working on and not cheat. Like running it's all about form, and if you cheat on the form, that's when you get injured.

There's a good reason that the running pundits recommend you roll around with the big rubber ball for strength training. It's called 'gravity'. In the three to four weeks that I've been strength training (two or three times a week) I've put on at least five pounds of muscle mass in the upper body. You would think that is a good thing, right? Well yeah, unless your goal is to run fast, especially up hill. The good news is that you look great for the cameras; the bad news is that the camera man has plenty of time to focus on you because you're moving so slow.

I think that if I was putting in 30 – 50 mile weeks that would keep me from bulking up so much. As the knee starts to cease its complaint, I'll start bringing up the mileage and that should slim me down a little.

Once you get up to speed and start really working out with weights it is a tremendous work out. There is nothing like being in the shower after and not being able to lift your arms to wash your hair! It's such a great muscle shaking exhaustion.

I know what you're thinking, "I'm a runner, I'm not going anywhere near those grunting behemoths over in the free weights section." That would be a mistake, you'd be missing out on some very useful knowledge about what your body is designed to do.

My advice is to approach it as a student of the physical arts. Pick out the person who looks like they know what they're doing and ask them to teach you HOW to lift weights. It's a whole different world for you to explore and I guarantee you'll love the way it makes you feel.

Puddles of Sweat and Burning Muscle Pain

Introduction:

This third entry in the 'busted knee trilogy' didn't come to fruition until 6 months after the first two. I couldn't ride in the winter when I started the series and then the knee got better and I had to drop biking to put on miles for Boston.

After Boston I immediately jumped into a triathlon training program and so far it is way cool. The near constant exercise has burned off another 10-15 pounds. The swimming and biking have reshaped my body a couple degrees away from 'dorky'.

I call my bike Fuji-san. It is an overweight aluminum framed 'racing' bike that I've spent a lot of time with over the last couple months. Like a favored pet he goes along for the ride with me and puts up with my abuse. We make unpleasant noises on the climbs and fly like the wind on the slopes.

Cross training and digging it!

"Spinning Class" sounded like some sort of sewing circle, but there I was at 5:45 AM at the club getting yelled at in a darkened room by some lady while being subjected to disco music from the 70's, (yes I remember, I was there). The room is full of happy cheerful people arranged in a circle on spinning bicycles like some bizarre sadomasochistic reading group.

"Ok, here comes a big hill! Everybody up! 60 seconds! Come on!"

Up? Up where? What hill? Are these people insane?

The whole time they are chatting away about their lives, loves and challenges. What is this? Some sort of exercise group therapy I've stumbled into?

I peddle away and try to do what they are doing but I am always on the verge of falling off the bike. I don't have the rhythm for the 'hills' and my bike conditioning seems to be lacking. It's like trying to rodeo-ride a bucking bronco. When I make a mistake the momentum of the flywheel punishes me. I play with the resistance knob, but it's futile.

I am, however, getting a pretty good work out. The heart rate is up and the pores are open. Working out indoors makes me sweat. When the lights come up my bike is floating in a ½ inch deep pool of salt water. It takes a few rolls of paper towels to mop it all up. No one else had the Niagara Falls thing going on. Am I just working harder or am I some sort of endocrinal freak? Maybe I could spread a bag of that SpeedDee Dry stuff around like they do at the hazmat sites?

Biking – it's actually hard work if you know what you're doing...and I'm learning. When the knee doctor finally gave up on my bashed patella last fall I was banished from running for a few months. With a bad case of 'climbing the walls' and a serious attack of balloonification setting in I had to do something. I set myself on a swim-bike-lift schedule at the gym to see if I could stem the tide.

This agenda appealed to me for a few reasons. First it would maintain some of the rigor and conditioning. Second it would strengthen the knee without abusing it. Third, it would give me some new things to learn. I always like to learn new things. And finally, in the back of my mind I had been toying with the idea of a triathlon for a couple years.

Riding a bike isn't as easy as I thought it would be. It has actually gotten harder as I have figured out the proper form. Before this, the last time I rode a bike on the road they only had ten speeds. For my last bike race I think I had playing cards in the spokes to make it sound cool. We're talking 35 years. A lot has changed!

I bought my first new road bike a couple years ago to have something to commute with. I remember the sticker shock. "Here's a nice middle of the road model for \$1,000." The nice lady had said.

I must have been obviously in stress. I had recently sold a perfectly good Raleigh 5 speed for \$10 at a yard sale. (100% manufactured in Nottingham England)

"I just want to ride to work..."

She read me like a cheap book, "Here's a discontinued model for \$600."

That's how I got my Fuji. I had a briefcase installed for my laptop and my wife ponied up for the shoes and speed-play pedals at my next birthday. It was love at first ride. It was so cool to be able to go as fast as the cars!

Through the long cold winter of 2005, I was able to talk my knee into coming around, partly because of the time spent in the pool and on the stationary bike. I got my number for Boston and switched back to putting in the miles and running all the great middle distance races the New England has to offer in the cold months.

In the back of my mind, I had a plan. After the marathon I would immediately transition to triathlon training. Not Ironman, but sprint tri training. This so far has worked out wonderfully.

Typically there is a physical and emotional letdown after Boston where the miles fall off and the pounds go on. It's too early to start into a program for a fall marathon and you're sick of running every day. In a nutshell you convince yourself that it is ok to take it easy because you've earned it by God! Then July

rolls around and your 20 pounds heavier and have to start at the bottom of the mountain again.

I've always been of the opinion that cycling is easy and running is hard. I wasn't sure that it would be enough exercise to be fulfilling or useful. With tri training I immediately reduced my running mileage to around 18 miles a week, but increased my work outs to 9 per week. Three runs, three bikes and three swims. Since there are only 7 days in a week that means you are doubling up on a couple.

According to my training philosophy you have to get one 'speed' workout in each discipline per week. That means a hard swim on Saturday and hard bike on Tuesday and a track workout on Thursday. The net result is you are constantly exhausted from something, but nothing gets over used.

It's pretty much all good news so far. All my marathon aches have gone away with the low mileage. I've actually lost another 5 pounds since Boston!

I was worried I'd loose all my conditioning by not putting in the miles, but that is not the case. I've been monitoring my Thursday night track workouts and I'm right on my splits without any loss.

The CFO of my company is one of those serious biker guys. He's got a bicycle that weighs as much as a large potato chip and cost as much as a small house. He's a Lance Armstrong groupie. Naturally I turned to him for help. It turns out you don't use all those gears, you only use the top 3 or 4 and when you stand up in the 'saddle' you don't push, you pull. He told me how to do hill workouts and 'spinning intervals'.

I went down to the bike shop to get my Fuji tuned up this spring. While I was there I thought I should get one of those shirts. You know which ones I mean. The biking NASCAR logo shirts. And maybe a pair of those cushiony shorts to protect the wedding tackle. I saw the Lance US Postal Service shirt. \$179.00! And the shorts? \$69.00! I can't think of any compelling reason to spend 250 bucks on spandex lingerie.

I'm just going to wear my old running stuff. So what if my tube shorts don't have padding? I've been married for 20 years and there are some bits I don't use too much anyways.

I love riding the bike. My favorite thing is going faster than the cars. It freaks them out. They want to pass you, but they can't without speeding. I can out accelerate them from a stop for about 300 yards before they catch me, and then they're afraid to pass me because I'm flying like a maniac.

When I travel for work I bring my shoes and my pedals with me, because, if you can't clip in, you only get half the workout. It causes me some problems in security.

“They are bike pedals!” I yell to the guy screening the luggage when I see that look come across his face. That way I can put my pedals on anyone’s bike and get a workout in.

Sometimes I’m forced to ride the stationary bike in the gym. I set it on the hill program at the highest difficulty and sling great sheets of sweat. A couple weeks ago I was at Bally’s and had just finished a ride. While I was on the other side of the room retrieving 30 or 40 paper towels to wipe up, one of the gym guys walked by the bike. He stopped and looked at the great puddle as if trying to figure out what fluid could possibly come out of a LifeCycle. Transmission fluid? Coolant? Yup, it’s coolant all right!

There is one part of my quadriceps that burns in serious pain when I drive up hills. I’ve never felt such muscle fatigue running. I’ve felt nauseous and dizzy but never that level of muscle pain. It’s cool. It’s also true that the biking helps your hill running. I’ve found a new gear on the hills when I’m off the bike and on my Asics.

I started to get cocky and attempted to do a trail ride on my mountain bike. I think those magazines that show folks in the woods on their bikes all happy and smiling, surrounded by nature, are guilty of false advertising. If it was a picture of me, I’d be face down in a muddy bog with the bike wrapped around me like some gory origami. My mountain bike hasn’t been tuned in awhile. It randomly chooses its own gears and typically it’s not a good choice. The bottom line is that trail riding for me is a lot like carrying a bike around in the woods.

I don’t care if I’m a biking weakling and wear the wrong clothes. It’s a blast and I think I’m going to be way over trained for this triathlon. I’m definitely going to come out the other side healthy and strong if I feel like running a qualifier in the fall, that is, if I don’t kill myself on that infernal machine.

Take my advice, swap out some of your running for some biking and swimming this summer. It will give your legs a chance to heal and keep you in shape for the fall race season. Pedal on!

We who about to eat salute you!

Introduction:

I had fun writing this one. It is a rare slice of honesty. If it weren't for training I'd be a 300 pound mess. No body likes to diet. I wrote this recently in the midst of a triathlon training program that has me as slim as I've been in five years, but that is not my normal shape.

My body strives for equilibrium 30-50 pounds higher than I am right now and works ceaselessly to attain it. It makes perfect sense to me that I should have to work ceaselessly to keep it off. The harder I work the more I keep off, but it's like a rubber band and will always pull back to its original, resting state when given the opportunity!

I over train so I can over eat

Admit it; you love eating. I love eating. This why we train, am I right? Isn't that in the back of your mind when you're putting in those 20 mile training runs for the marathon or those two-a-days for a triathlon? While you're training are you thinking; "Man, I can't wait to eat!"? My thoughts exactly! In fact, if you're like many of us, you cherish being able to stuff your face, and hard training is the justification you use.

I won't tell anybody if you don't. Let them think we're all health conscious athletes. When they look at us, all hard and healthy looking, I'm sure they assume carrots, celery sticks, and legumes. You and I know the truth.

"You look great! You've lost some weight!"

"Yeah, I've been training for a marathon, I feel pretty good."

Notice the word 'diet' never entered the conversation. They have no idea of how hard we have to work to maintain those 15 pound love handles and extra-wide hips while running 50 mile weeks, do they? It's not easy. You have to eat 24 X 7, but I gladly make the sacrifice!

Not only do we use our training to justify over eating, we also use it to justify eating food that is bad for us. Maybe you don't, but I sure do. I think subconsciously we believe that putting in those extra miles not only balances the calorie total but somehow cleans out all the trans fat and sodium too, (not to mention alcohol). We think of our training like some blessed panacea. It's a purgative penance that brings us back into balance.

You know what? Great! I'd eat too much crappy food if I wasn't running and probably be as big as a house. This way, at least I'm breaking even and I feel

pretty good about it. Maybe it's a win-win situation. It also fits well with my built in Irish Catholic need for suffering! I need guilt and penitence; that's the ticket.

Let me share with you some of my favorite training foods. I'm interested in yours as well. Send me a note about the wacky or odious victuals that you stuff down your throat and I'll write a story on it, (cyktrussell@yahoo.com). Winner gets a dozen Tim Horton Maple Creams, (they make all other donuts seem like low-calorie Snackwells).

Let's start with the comfort food. Number one on my list is Hooter's Chicken Wings. I like them breaded with the hot sauce. I could care less about the coeds in hot pants; just serve me up a 20 plate of those bad boys any night after a hard run. They have the perfect combination of deep fried greasy meat wrapped in delectable carbohydrate coating liberally dunked in sodium and Tabasco. That's training food!

My number two comfort food, (and by comfort food I mean food that will put you into a catatonic trance), is Chinese food. There is nothing more satisfying than a few pounds of General Tsao's spicy chicken to clear the lactic acid. Another magical combination of deep fried and breaded meat slathered in hot sauce. Yum! I can finish any number of intervals if I know the Good General is waiting at home for me.

Number three is fried Calamari, or any well fried sea food. Squid is brain food. Are you noticing a trend? I've found that even the healthiest foodstuffs can be converted to the dark side by deep frying.

Let's not forget the perennial favorite in every city worldwide, number four on our list; Pizza! Not that wimpy cheese stuff you feed your kids. I like it with 'the works'. Big piles of smoked meats and grilled vegetables that, if you do it right, should make the box hard to close. Grease should be soaking through the paper plates into the table cloth. That's a meal!

Note: Any food that hardens and turns white as it gets cold is a potential winner!

Note: If you have to put the box it came in outside because of the reeking smell, it's definitely a winner!

Can you visualize my arteries sealing themselves shut with partially hydrogenated vegetable oil? Yes Sir! Bring it on!

Each of these offerings is about 8,000 bad calories, but, that's only an extra 800 miles of easy running and I was planning on doing that anyhow.

I like healthy foods too, but only in mass quantities. For Example, I love sushi. Sushi is brain food. It's yummy and densely packed with protein. Of course, you must start with a large Miso soup to cleanse the palate.

When I sit down they bring out the extra large sushi boat. It's more like a sushi barge. The little bingo card that they have you fill out looks like a completed New York Times crossword when I'm done with it. I think I've personally depopulated fisheries and put some species on the endangered list in one sitting. I'm so ashamed; such gluttony! I'll have to throw in a couple extra 800's to make up for it.

My other favorite healthy food is the salad. Not the normal salad, the big salad. When you want a big salad you need a big bowl. You can descend like a locust plague on your local salad bar or make them at home. Those all-you-can-eat salad guys break into tears of insolvency when they see me coming. I do to a salad what Dagwood does to a sandwich.

Start with a good foundation of lettuce – (iceberg – romaine- butter crunch). On top of this erect a sturdy scaffolding of your favorite vegetables, (Broccoli – cauliflower – carrots – cukes – onions – peppers – celery – cabbage – tomato – basil). Apply a layer of standard decking materials (Mushrooms – a can of Tuna – Boiled eggs – chicken bits) Garnish with tasty sprinklings (Raisins – cranberries – olives – almonds – sunflower seeds – gorgonzola – mozzarella – pepperocini).

Don't get me wrong. I'm not implying that you choose a couple from each category. No way, put all this together in a big bowl. That's it. Don't despoil the natural cornucopia of taste with salad dressing, that's fattening right? And don't ruin it with croutons, (nasty bits of dead bread that tear the roof of your mouth to shreds). If you want some variety you can wrap it up in a really big tortilla or make 1/2 dozen pitas.

That's a lunch! There's enough roughage there to keep a brontosaurus regular. That will counter balance a few dozen Hooter's hot wings. It gives new meaning to the phrase, "I'm just going to have a salad".

Hey, we need our energy, right? Surely all those long runs clean the pipes out. It's ironic that some of us with the healthiest bodies may have the unhealthiest diets. On close inspection we may be stuck in some strange binge and purge dementia, balancing one addiction with another.

Don't you hate it when you get injured? It doesn't take long for that 8,000 calorie a day diet to catch up to you when you've got your feet up, does it? Yikes! I'm going to invent a new word for this phenomena; "Ballooningification". Like it?

I wonder what would happen if I ate well. What if I kept training and stayed away from the fat and processed salty foods? What if I adopted the soy bean and fresh fruit mantra? Would I shrivel to an anemic shell of a man? Or would I have some great metabolic epiphany? We will probably never find out, but be sure to say nice things about me when my heart finally gives up pushing all that Crisco around!

I did try some of the new age food that is popular now. I bought some rye grass drink powder and began drinking it instead of soda. That's right, powdered grass that you mix with water. It's supposed to be chock full of amino acids and other elementary unprocessed stuff. For \$30 bucks a jar it had better be multi-orgasmic as well! My kids had great fun telling everyone I was drinking grass. I'm afraid I couldn't stick with it. Actually, \$30 or not, I couldn't finish the jar.

Similar stuff, available now, that is really tasty is "Smart Food". They mix the grass with a bunch of fruity bits to create a sort of sweet green slurry. It's actually very filling and very energizing. I'd recommend it; seriously.

Where does this leave us? Same place we started. We love to eat. It comforts us. We love to run. It comforts us as well. The two together form a nice symbiotic ying and yang. As runners we are not among those cold and timid souls that know neither hunger nor satiation. We tend to live at the extremes and live our lives fully. Isn't it far better to have tasted pain as well as lobster bisque in any given day than to have sat wanting on the sidelines of life hungry and untested? I'll take the pasta over pabulum.

Go out today and eat something you've never tried. Go to a strange restaurant and order something off the menu that you have no idea what it is. You can always run it off tomorrow.

Aliens at the track

Introduction:

The delineation between recreational running and training is the track work out. It's a love-hate relationship. There is nothing I fear as much as a hard track work out. It causes my body great distress to run fast, (fast for me, that is). Bottom line: it hurts.

But, on the other hand, if you want to race well you have to spend some days suffering at the altar of speed, huffing and puffing around a 400 meter oval. There is nothing that will give you an 'I just had a great workout' sense of satisfaction like a good showing at the track.

Eventually it becomes part of your life and you cherish it like you cherish all hard fought battles.

What's with all this speed work anyhow?

I often end up at the track after hours. I work too much, have an active family and all those other blessings that push and pull on a runner's time. Sometimes the best hour to get a workout in is late at night, after dark.

Many times I'll get home late from the airport, or the chaos of the day will simply crowd out all extra curricular activity until the sun is down. I've had some great workouts all by my lonesome on the track, in the cool moonlight with the fireflies and bats to keep me company.

If you're a mid-packer like me, the people who share your universe are as often befuddled by your running necessities. This 'running' thing is ok in theory, as long as it doesn't interfere with other familial duties and keeps within the domain of normal business hours.

My wife will look at me putting on my running gear from the bed where she is preparing to be numbed asleep by the TV, and say "You're not going running now." It is not a question. She knows I'm going running. It is an expression of disbelief bordering on disgust, and tinged with resignation. What she means, if you could see the comic thought bubble over her head, is "You are an idiot, what did I do to deserve this?"

In polite society one evidently does not go to the track after dark. Evidently that is beyond the bounds of decorum and pushes the boundary of sanity.

It's ok. After being married for nigh on 20 years, her opinions are more a reaction to habit than an accusation. Like a doctor's mallet to the knee, she feels compelled to remind me how intrusive and farcical this running thing is.

I can deal with the people at work. I don't mind the clients who look at me like I've got a screw loose when I turn down dinner with them to go for a run. They treat me as if I'm a diabetic who needs to slip behind the curtain for a discrete syringe of insulin. "Well...How long do you need?" (A life time would be nice, any questions?)

It's the kids that really hurt. Looking up at you from bed with those eyes, they go right for the heart. "Daddy, all you do is work and run. You're never here." And so it goes, we are all mid-pack martyrs for our sports.

But, the siren calls and I'm off. Sometimes, I'll run to the track, and sometimes I'll drive. It depends on the workout I have scheduled and how much energy I have left at the end of the day.

In New England we usually can only run the outside tracks when the weather accommodates. I don't care about the temperature, but snow and ice make the corners a little tricky. (Yes, I have tried to do speed work in a snow storm)

Usually at night the track is deserted. There may be an occasional walker, but they disappear not long after dusk, leaving me to charge in circles, or rather ovals, in the gathering gloom.

It's not so bad, at the track at night. I'm a night guy anyhow. I like it when it's cool and quiet. I like it when my body is awake from the day's effort. I like the way the stress can be turned into energy and effort.

At night the night-bugs are out. Frogs are peeping and grunting from the low areas. Bats flit across the open infield chasing lightning bugs that flash a Morse code mating dance.

My track has birds that live in the infield. They are called Killdeer because of their call "Kill-Deer! Kill-Deer!" as they run about on the soccer pitch, agitated by my presence in the dusk.

My track, (I call it 'my track' because the thousands of laps I've run there over the years gives me a sense of propriety), my track is old. It is an old asphalt track from whenever they built the school, maybe the 50's or 60's? It's not in bad shape, considering its age.

It is a 'fast' track or 'lively' track as they say in the parlance of tracks. I know where all the cracks, holes and lumps are. They tried to screw me up a couple years ago by applying asphalt patching to the holes. Overnight they turned my familiar holes into lumps and it changed the whole experience for me, but I adjusted.

When it rains I know where the puddles will form and I know the shallow-water paths, like an old mariner plying among the shoals. I know where to drift outside or inside to find the smoother lanes of travel. I know every inch of my track. I

can close my eyes and clearly catalog the topographical anomalies one by one along the whole 400 meters.

I know which way the wind blows at each time of year. I know my target splits for 200, 400, 800 etc. Sometimes I bring a piece of chalk to keep track of my workouts by scribbling progress on the asphalt, like a child at play.

I've run on tracks all across the country while traveling, but returning to my track gives me a sense of being home. It's just right. It fits. It's comforting.

Sometimes I have to share my track with others from town. I once had a soccer mom ask me "Why can't you run somewhere else?" Meaning, why are you bothering us while we're trying to watch the soccer practice? (Umm...It's a track...)

One time, when I was there for an early lunch, they let the little kids out to run. It was so much fun as they would try to race me for 100 meters or so each time I came around. It was cool. They gave me a boost.

One night running late, the town decided to spray for mosquitoes. There I was, trying to run, when a tanker truck pulls around the track spewing malathion gas. I had to quit early that night.

My track is situated behind, or rather beside a middle school. It has poor illumination from one street light over by the school. 90% of the track lies in darkness. There are woods and athletic fields on the two other sides and, on the final side, behind a row of medium sized White Pine trees, there is the highway. I'm treated to three lanes in both directions with lots of trucks at night, roaring by with intrusive Doppler shifts of noise.

Most nights it's just me. It's cool. It's peaceful. It's beautiful. ...but it really hurts. Let us get right to the heart of the matter; with the myriad of peaceful trails and lanes at our disposal, why do we journey to these lonely strips of asphalt and beat ourselves miserable?

Some people would say, "You're a marathon runner, not a sprinter, what are you doing at the track?" That's a great question, because it's a question I ask myself every time I'm there. What's with all this track nonsense? It's boring to run around in circles, right? It hurts too. I dread my track workouts like electric shock therapy. Then, why do we do it?

We do it because it represents a universal truth; if you want to get better, you have to spend some time in your 'discomfort zone'. That's what the track is for us, a pure and simple litmus test of speed and condition. You can lie to yourself on the long runs, but when it is 800 meters and you're wearing a watch, there is no fudging the answers. You can or you cannot run four laps in X minutes, bottom line, black or white, one or zero, and most of the time the truth hurts.

It is also this truth that will set you free. The track will show you the way to strength, power and confidence that you will find in no other place. That's why we go.

Humiliation led me to the track. Humbled I was by that old nemesis Boston. It kicked my butt and left me weak and tortured. Then it made me mad. I knew I could run the distance, but I had to take 40 minutes off my time to qualify.

I went to the internet and found a workout plan by some veterans. It consisted of track work twice a week. Tuesday speed - Thursday tempo. That's it. That's the secret. That was the key. Combined with a good base and solid long runs, the track has enabled me to qualify for Boston every time I've tried.

It stinks. It hurts. It is hard to make yourself do twice a week, but if you can do it, the benefits are amazing. Besides the fact that it will cut many minutes off your marathon time, track work will make all your distances faster and all your runs easier.

At the track you will learn about yourself. You will learn pace. After a few weeks you will be able to accurately judge your pace by effort level and not have to look at your watch. Repetitive speed work will give you a mechanically smooth and energy conservative stride. It will give you a quiver full of strides and paces from which you can pull when you need them with confidence.

The track will teach you about your body and its limits. It will make you aware of, and let you manipulate your physical thresholds. It will give you the confidence to look discomfort in the eye say "I know what's on the other side" and run through it. That gives you the power at the end of a long race to say "Only a mile left. I know I can run a mile".

Like your long runs, at some point, maybe weeks or months from now, it will start to seem easy, and you'll say to yourself "what was the big deal?"

Enjoy it while you can, because the track is a fickle mistress. This type of conditioning will dissipate ten times faster than it took you to accumulate. It is a hard peak to stay on top of and there is work on every slope. It's worth the effort, even if you only do it once, to see what you're capable of and to discover things in yourself that you did not know were there.

My advice to you is to find your track, or find a track and make it your own. Suffer through a 12 week program of twice a week speed and tempo. By the third week you will start to see changes that will amaze you if you have never done it before.

When the snow melts in the spring and I make my way down to my track for that first real workout it is like seeing an old friend that I haven't seen for awhile. I'm glad to see that old friend and reminisce over good times had, but then that old friend tells me how slow I've gotten and we get to it.

Find your track.

Mud Meringue Pie

Introduction:

In New England we have four seasons, but in between those four seasons are times of transition that make things a bit unstable for a couple weeks.

Spring has sprung, and it's all over my shoes.

How do you make a mud meringue? In the cold New England winters the water under the ground freezes and the ice expands pushing up crystalline frost heaves. When the weather warms, the ice melts leaving an unsupported, distended crust of clay lurking on the trail, ready to suck your shoe off. It looks like normal ground, but it's an Asics tiger trap.

On the sides of hills it is a couple of inches of slick muck on top of still frozen ice. I find myself grabbing for trees and wind milling for balance. The ground has no place for my trail shoes to hold. One hundred percent gravity with zero percent friction.

We got over 100 inches of snow in my woods in the suburbs of Boston this year. It's melting fast. The snow banks along the road have receded to lurking grey hulks with car parts and bits of consumer flotsam sticking out of them like lost treasure.

The multiple storms have left layers of ice and snow of different properties randomly distributed throughout my run. We got big dumps of snow from a series of Nor'easters that came swirling up the coast with gusting winds that drove the snow sideways. As a result the snow is not evenly distributed. In places it's melted to bare ground. In other places it's still a foot and a half deep.

Out on the trail with the dog it's like running in deep wet gravel. I have to crop my stride. One foot sinking in the other not. The worst part is when you try to pick up the pace and a foot suddenly falls through the crust like a trip wire cutting your stride out from under you. It's good exercise! It really works your glutes and your lateral control mechanisms. But it's not for the weak of ankle.

In the end of March the rains start. Any low lying place in the woods becomes a pond. A 'vernal pool'. Many of these vernal pools block my progress and I have to bushwhack to higher ground to get around them, sometimes running along the ancient stone walls to keep my feet relatively dry. In places the low parts have been augmented with stepping stones or logs for you to totter across and test you balance.

The streams that were a trickle before are now raging brooks 10 -12 feet across, threatening the log bridges we have thrown across them for transit. The logs that were slick with ice a month ago are now just plain slick. Buddy, being a Border

collie, doesn't like to wade and daintily trots across the log bridge in front of me. Mr. Agility Dog, he suffers the cockiness of youth, but I know that every once in a while he loses his balance and takes a plunge! Then he has to run with me all skinny, contrite and miserable looking.

Even with all the helpful civil engineering it's inevitable that I'll slip and bury my shoe up to the sock line in some mushy hole. Then I'll run with my foot making squishing noises and end up with another permanently brown sock. When I get back the dog will be a wet mess. I'll towel him down with those same old towels I take to races and the track. I may even heave him into the Jacuzzi for a scrub if I can't take the 'natural' smell he has acquired in the woods.

In the snow and mud there are lots of deer hoof prints. You can sense that spring is here with its pent up animal lust waiting to burst out in a feverish green explosion. In the big brook Buddy scares a couple of wild ducks who are setting up shop for this spring's brood. It takes me while to convince him that he does not stand a chance of catching them.

The high water table drives critters out of the ground. This time of year sleepy skunks and cranky possums are wandering around after having been rudely evicted from their burrows. There is evidence of optimistic beavers working on a big birch tree. The sawdust from diligent woodpeckers litters the ground. Their "Knock, Knock, knock" rings in the air as they pry into wet rotted trees that did not survive the winter.

As I run along I keep seeing small motes of movement in the air. At first I think it might be those 'stars' that you see when you push yourself too hard, right before you pass out. Then I realize that they are flies of some sort. May flies? No, March flies! Nature is waking up, erupting from the ooze.

The days are beautiful. 45 degrees and sunshine after an endless winter of ice, snow and darkness fills you with hope and happiness. I come home soaked and steaming, mud-spattered and caked. I love my woods. I love spring.

Have some fun. Don't waste your time on the treadmill when there's a world full of perfectly good mud and snow to run in. Spas charge big money for this. Get out there and live it!

Section II

New England Racing Stories

New England History Primer

Introduction:

When I got asked to write an article for a magazine about New England four seasons weather, I got to thinking about what 'New England' is. I had recently read a great science fiction story about H. L. Mencken coming back to possess the bodies of charlatans and bombasts while they were performing their audacities. I thought to myself, "If Mencken were alive today, how would he describe 'New England'?"

If you're from around here you may get this...

You often hear us talking about "New England" running. I find that most people, other than English majors and Jeopardy contestants don't even know what New England is. I offer up this well researched primer for you to be the 'smart one' at your next social gathering.

First of all, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, while they are eastern states with crappy weather and cranky citizens, are not part of New England. That part of the country was originally populated by the Dutch and was "New Holland" until the British, with some gunboat diplomacy, persuaded a change in ownership.

No, New England consists of six little states clinging precariously to the edge of the continent and dangling dangerously close to French Canada. Those six little states are, clockwise, from the top left, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

The original English settlers came first to Plymouth, south of Boston. These consisted of a fanatical group of liberal Democrats led by Joseph Kennedy Sr. called the Puritans. They set up a nice cozy socialist commune in Cambridge, Mass. that can still be seen today.

Rhode Island was founded by immigrant Sicilian and Portuguese Mafioso who, upon arriving, figured that they would need to set up a state government to get the really good graft. Successive governments have managed to maintain this fine tradition in Providence right up to modern times.

A disgruntled life insurance salesman named Dexter Hartford left Manhattan in 1952 to establish what is now known as Connecticut. As an interesting side note, 80% of Connecticut's gross annual income is from speeding tickets given to unwary travelers from Massachusetts and New York.

Now Vermont is an interesting story. A large posse of burnt-out hippies with a strange affection for dairy cattle left the established colonies in the late 1960's and invaded the Green Mountains. They overran the peaceful indigent French

Canadians. Those Canucks that were not decimated by whole-grain bread and new-age healing fled back across the border to Montreal.

As for Maine and New Hampshire, scientist didn't even know anyone lived there until 1987, when a man calling himself Emmitt Bean canoed into Haverhill in a strange plaid shirt and rubber boots, bringing gifts of maple syrup and moose-sausage. An unmanned probe is planned for early next year.

So there you have it! Now you know all about the history of New England. Make sure you use this knowledge wisely for the good of mankind, and come visit us up here some time.

New England – The Four Seasons

Introduction:

This was the article that I produced to fulfill my commitment for New England Weather. Re-reading it now I find it a bit sappy with kernels of truth. Frankly, I think it could use a little more Mencken and a little less 'ode to a tree'. However, I do love that Upton Sinclair quote. If you ever have a month or so with nothing to do, or a nonstop plane trip to Australia, you can struggle through *The Jungle* and you'll see why it caused such a stir among the capitalists way back when. On the other hand, I have never gotten much of a charge out of any George Eliot I've read. Note: If you find yourself on NPR or Jeopardy, George Eliot was a female.

Ode to a beautiful place and a running utopia

<Begin excerpting here>

To everything - turn, turn, turn

There is a season - turn, turn, turn

And a time for every purpose under heaven

The Byrds, or The Book of Ecclesiastes, (depending on your point of view).

<End excerpting>

We are a hardy lot here in New England. We manage our lives around the cycle of the seasons. We get four real seasons here. We celebrate, or depending on your temperament, suffer through Mother Earth's yearly rotations.

As runners we experience the seasons up-close and personal. We get outside and breathe deeply the changing air. We immerse ourselves in the environment and our experience is shaped by it. Some times we even slip and roll in it. We know the good times because we have run the bad times. We are not among those cold and timid souls who know neither winter's chill nor summer's burn.

Winter

<Begin excerpting here>

Now the dreadful winter was come upon them. In the forests, all summer long, the branches of the trees do battle for light, and some of them lose and die; and then come the raging blasts, and the storms of snow and hail, and strew the ground with these weaker branches.

The Jungle, Upton Sinclair

<End excerpting>

It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining. I'm wearing long, thick winter tights, a CoolMax shirt, a polyester hooded sweatshirt and a hooded bright yellow fleece sweater. I have my red fuzzy ski cap and hunter orange running gloves to make sure I'm not mistaken for a deer. I've got my trail running shoes with the big lugs for extra grip on ice and snow.

It's midday and the temperature struggles into double digits. The winter sun rides in the sky with a southward slant. Its glow gives the illusion of heat and its brilliance is blinding reflected off the white snow. In the woods the light will be filtered and I'll be able to see fine.

I was going to go to the gym and run on the treadmill, but the winter world behind my house as viewed through my home office window seemed too enchanting to miss.

Two Nor'easters came through this week and left their bounty blanketing everything. Two and three feet of drifted dry powder lies sparkling in the sun.

I figure it's been two days; someone has beaten down the trail by now. Typically the snowmobiles will have had their first-storm party and the running surface will be nice and flat and firm.

I figure wrong. Except for some snowshoe and cross country ski tracks, Buddy, my border collie and I are breaking trail. We take turns. When I have to stop, gasping and exhausted, he bounds ahead doing his doggie version of leap frog. Even though he's got four wheel drive, his legs are shorter than the snow is deep. It's hard going, like running in deep sand.

The air is dry and bites at your insides as you breathe. There is no smell except for the occasional whiff of wood burning in fireplaces. The cold wind rubs the leafless trees together making creaking and groaning noises. There isn't much sign of life out here now in the dead of winter. Some deer and coyote tracks, some squirrel and rabbit prints, but no birds sing and no frogs peep.

New Englanders wear their winters like a badge of courage. They revel in the adversity. The winter season is a season of preparation and reflection. In the spring there are a number of great races including the mythic Boston Marathon. They know that waiting for nice weather means not running and they are made of too tough a stuff to let anything rob them of their running joy.

Spring

<Begin excerpting here>

"It must be springtime; the saps are running in Hopkinton"

Boston reporter,

<End excerpting>

And when the spring comes it is like being freed from prison. The New England runner sees the sun in April as if they have never seen it before. Winter is fine for a few months, but you get tired of it.

On the first sunny 50 degree day coeds across the region sprawl in a state of undress on quadrangle grass like a Labrador retriever in front of a wood stove. The same weather in October would drive them to put on thick sweaters and huddle inside with the thermostat turned up. You have to live through the snow and ice and wind and cold to really appreciate a warm sunny day.

For runners the spring rebirth means stripping off tights and sweaters and exposing whitened flesh to the air. The frost in the ground begins to melt and at the same time it starts to rain. This produces a fine deep muck that will suck the shoes right off your feet. The spring melt and runoff fills the low lying areas with water and muck.

We don't care. We break the bonds of heavy clothes and burst forth into the world with crazed exuberance. There are hundreds of great races to run in the cool spring mornings. The sun lingers into the early evening making training easier and more comfortable. The migratory birds return and fill the trails with loud, frenzied mating rituals.

Lilacs perfume the lanes, apple trees spread blossoms in the orchards. Daffodils and Forsythia paint suburban landscapes a lurid yellow. It's a time of hope and passions found.

The spring marathons come and for a few weeks the whole world is focused on skinny little guys who run really fast.

There are two or three weeks in May when New England all of a sudden becomes green. It goes from budding brown to overwhelming green in a few short days. There is a riot of deciduous outpouring. It is a magical transformation. The trails once again become cathedrals of Oak and Maple and thrive with life. It is a beautiful sea of green.

Summer

<Begin excerpting here>

It's summertime and the living is easy...

Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heywood, "Porgy and Bess"

<End excerpting>

It gets hot in the summer in New England. In July and August the mercury climbs and the humidity swelters. We head to the rocky beaches of Maine and New Hampshire to run on the shore and dive in the icy waters. We head in droves to Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket to wrestle bass and bluefish out of the currents and into our barbeques. Lobsters and steamed clams are eaten after a day of baseball and Fourth of July parades like a Norman Rockwell painting.

Boaters cruise the harbors of Newport with the bright sun glinting off of marbled mansions. They were built by 19th century robber barons as ostentatious summer cottages before income tax was invented.

Summer outings to ramble the rolling hills of Connecticut may find you stumbling across dinosaur tracks from 80 million years ago. The days are hot and humid. The mornings are bright and cool. The noon air buzzes with cicada song.

I run at night when it cools down into the 70's and 80's and Oxygen replaces some of the hot ozone in the air. There aren't many cars out and it is peaceful. The peepers call out for mates in the swampy areas. Owls cry mournfully in search of prey. Each section of my route gives off a different smell of cooking or freshly mown grass. The neighbor's dog barks half-heartedly, he knows who I am and it is too hot to make a serious sortie.

It is moonless, still and dark. The overcast haze blurs the stars. The fireflies blink on and off in great numbers, randomly peppering the darkness like tracer rounds. Somewhere overhead the leathery shuffling of bat wings dives close by. My singlet darkens with great drips of sweat.

I'm running though the old town graveyard where revolutionary soldiers lie and small American flags sprout from graves like lilies. A cold wind hits me hard from the Northwest. The barometric pressure drops and my skin prickles. There is another rush of air and a rumble.

As I turn for home with a giddy-up in my stride the heavens break forth in torrents of great, greasy, warm rain drops. I smile as the flood of rain washes the sweat from my eyes. My feet squelch happily through little rivers and the world is cleansed. A few minutes and it passes, leaving the world smelling of warm, wet dirt. Running is spiritual and sometimes you get baptized. The air is now cool and clean and the summer dust drains into the culvert.

Fall

<Begin excerpting here>

*Delicious autumn! My very soul is wedded to it,
and if I were a bird I would fly about the earth
seeking the successive autumns.*

George Eliot

<End excerpting>

In New England Fall is a time of marathons and racing. Having trained through the summer we are tanned and fit, ready to test ourselves at the local competition. The days begin to get shorter and winter's approach is imminent. The days retain their warmth, but the mornings and evenings begin to chill.

Thanksgiving is a holiday born in New England when the Puritans celebrated surviving the seasons in this hostile climate. It was and is a time of harvest and bounty. Great orange pumpkins gather in fields around frost withered stocks and children celebrate. Clydesdale horses drag hayrides past houses decorated with corn stalks and squash cornucopia. Teenagers squat over buckets in the fall sun pulling potato harvests from the rocky Maine soil. Two hundred year old orchards offer heirloom apples and pears to young pick-your-own families.

The undergrowth dies back and a carpet of leaves crunches underfoot as you cruise the trails. The trees rain multicolored tokens down around you when the wind blows. There are yellow ashes, brown oaks, rust-colored hickories and flaming red sumac. The undeniable star of the show is the maple tree with its bright orange and red and yellow boldly brushed across the New England palette.

The White Mountains in New Hampshire gird their granite peaks in breath-taking swaths of color. The Presidential range is perfect for a fall hike, but be careful not to be caught in Franconia by the changing New England weather.

The wooden covered bridges of Vermont's Green Mountains guard meandering slender rivers. The leaves attract tourists from all over the world to see their gaudy autumn display. You can spend a day running the dirt roads of the North East Kingdom. Sail a boat to Canada across the length of great Lake Memphramagog. Spend the days sampling good cheese and run the trails in the morning frost as winter lurks just around the corner.

As the tourists choke the rural highways, we New England runners carefully pack away our fall marathon medals. We open our winter closets and brush off thick winter tights, fleecy sweaters and fuzzy hats. We revel in the fall and look forward to a holiday season of snow and good food, of family and warmth.

The blue globe of the Earth flies to the far side of its elliptic and our small corner is tilted away from the sun. The seasons change. New England runners don't fight the change in season, they prepare for it, and then they embrace it. The sun rises and sets, but every day we still have our runs to keep us whole as a guiding force through the cycles of nature.

Pub Race Coming of Age Portends a Culture Shift

Introduction:

After a couple years off and on with injuries I started running the old races again and found that the times they were a changing. Road racing was a sport for a handful of fringe crazies in the old days and now it has morphed into something everyone in the family can do.

Like all change, it's good for some and bad for others. Like all change you can't stop it.

2004 Hangover Classic

It required a swim in the Atlantic Ocean, but I got my "Hangover Classic" glass. That makes two. I got one last time I ran this New Year's Day event three years ago.

Much had changed. The venue was new. The course was different. The field was larger. The race felt different. It was like when you see a familiar youngster after a long separation and they are a foot taller. You are still glad to see the niece or nephew but you are forced to say, "My Goodness, look at you!"

There are many 'pub' races in the area. Most pub races were started as an excuse to drink beer in the time honored tradition of sports and alcohol. They are the result of members' efforts to smear a veneer of legitimacy across the act of hanging out in a bar with your running buddies all weekend.

I'm sure the original guys who decided to run a 10k and go swimming in the ocean on New Year's day never thought it would grow into more than 680 participants.

One of the things I noticed this year was that the crowd was a lot better dressed. This was not the motley collection of sweatshirts and ski caps that greeted me in 2001. All the local clubs were in their matching uniforms, like at the Mill Cities Relay. There was also an abundance of Boston Marathon logo-wear.

It impressed me as slightly odd that runners should be making an effort to look good for a pub race on New Year's Day. I was intimidated that I would soon be competing against all these apparently proud veterans of many marathons. I introduced myself to two healthy looking young gentlemen in matching Boston 2003 outfits while stretching.

"So, you guys run Boston?" Says I,

“Yeah, last year.”

“How’d you do?”

“Well, Bob hear ran a 4:15, but the heat got to me...”

It turns out these guys earned their stripes by raising \$5,000 bucks for a charity. Looking around, I thought there was definitely a culture shift going on.

I’m probably the last one to notice, but the sport is becoming mainstream. It is either a ‘good’ thing or a ‘bad’ thing, depending on your point of view. But, regardless of my or your point of view, change is happening and it is a symptom of a broader cultural shift.

I wondered how the numbers had changed in three years, and if they support my hypothesis that a broader swath of the American public no longer sees running on New Years Morning as aberrant behavior?

I did some research. I compared the results from the two races I ran. The 2001 race had 620 finishers. The 2004 race had 689 finishers. That’s a nice increase of 11% overall.

But, are more ‘new-runners’ running? Or are these races just getting better pull? One thing that supports the ‘new-runner’ hypothesis is that the number of 10K runners was almost exactly the same this year as three years ago, however, the less-taxing 5K participation jumped by 25%.

What about the quality of the field? I took a sample reference point from the middle of the pack. This guy, (we’ll call him AverageGuyRunner) ran 41:33 in 2001 for a 56th place finish. That same pace in 2004 would have put him in 56th place. No change in the mid pack.

I bet that if someone (who can figure out the formulas in Excel) did a statistical survey of local results over the last 5 years, they would discover some trends. I bet the overall average pace is dropping as participation increases. I bet there are substantially more women running. I bet the field is getting older, on average. That’s what it looks like to me.

Now, getting back to whether it’s a ‘good’ thing or a ‘bad’ thing... It’s definitely good for local events that are reaching more people. It’s definitely making the sport more accessible and inclusive. It raises the quality of the sport for everybody.

It makes you wonder what is going to happen when the sports marketing people smell money in the trend. What bombastic marketing barrage will we be subjected too? Will we be seeing J-Lo sporting a B.A.A. cap at a press conference? Are we to become, heaven forbid, ‘trendy’?

I would also venture to say that these trends are bad for the traditionalist. The reclusive recidivists who, despite their warm talk, like to think of their sport as a 'fringe' activity. They will just have to continue to find refuge in their ultra-marathons and other extreme variations.

Perhaps I think too much. I had a blast at the race. The race was fun. The course was flat and forgiving. The weather was warm, (for New England). The race was well organized. The après party was happy and hopping. The free beer flowed. The people were nice, and the water was cold, but felt great on my tired old legs.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder if those two young men in the nice active-wear would be surprised to know that Bill Rodgers won Boston, (and set a course/American record) in a T-shirt that he hand lettered with a marker before the race?

A day at the beach!

Introduction:

This is my race report from 2005. It was my first race of any distance and first long run after my accident the previous June. I ran fat and happy with a knee brace, not knowing if this was the first run of a successful Boston campaign or another abortive comeback try.

2005 Hangover Classic.

There's this thing that we do in New England on the first of the year. We go swimming. In the Atlantic Ocean. Outside! No one really knows where this tradition started but we are all quite sure it is alcohol related.

The crazies at the Whirlaway Sports Running Club have piggy backed a race on this tradition for a few years now. I ran my first Hangover classic on January 1st 2001. Back then the race started and finished at the namesake sports bar and transversed the back roads of Salisbury. Now it starts and finishes right down next to the beach and runs up and down the shore road.

In '01 I did not go for the swim, but that was really cold day. The last two years the weather has been warm and I have taken the dip. In '01 I was fast enough to 'earn' a mug with my finish place. Not this year! If I wanted a mug I was going to have to make like Jacques Cousteau with the lobsters.

I wasn't sure I was going to make this perennial classic. Not because of a hangover, but because my knee has been bugged since June. I've been running less than 10 miles a week and have a serious Clydesdale infliction at 205+ pounds. When I run it's like that scene in Jurassic Park when the T-Rex is coming and the ground shakes.

Having a dodgy knee, this 10k was my longest run in months. It's not a challenging course. It's flatter than a pancake up and down the beach road. It still kicked my overweight, out of shape butt. But, it was fun and the weather was great. You could say with a straight face that it was beach weather. At race time it was 50 degrees Fahrenheit with a bright sun and a strong, gusty wind.

I like races that have an edge and this one has a few edges. It's got the ocean, the flat course, a great crowd of veteran runners, beer at the water stops, (I'm not kidding), and, most importantly the swim.

There were many B.A.A logos and lots of club singlets. This race is not a secret to the local racing community. There must have been 50 Merrimack Valley Striders there.

Casey Moulton won it all alone with a 4:53 pace and Dan Verrington followed in second with a 5:11 pace. I was way in the back with the drunks and gimps.

One cool thing is that I ran with almost-Olympic race walker Joanne Dow. Don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't running that slowly. She was walking a 7:30 pace. And me, being the happy idiot I am, ran up beside her and said, "You've got an interesting stride, it almost looks like you're walking."

She was the only American woman race walker to meet the Olympic A standard last year, but got kept off the team on a 'technicality' by finishing second at the trials. By some quirk in the qualifying rules, if Teresa Vail, who finished first in the trials had walked the A standard, both she and Dow would have gone to the Olympics. Vail didn't race the A standard and Dow's Olympic dreams were dashed for now. She was nice to talk with and walked a 7:30 comfortably.

We went north up the beach road into a strong, gusty head wind, fortunately it was a trailing wind on the way back. At the turn-around and 3 mile water stop they were pouring cold beers for anyone who could stomach it and they had many takers. Some of the crazies run this race just so they can drink beer while they run. It's a happy thing. Not this boy, I'd never make it back.

Since I finished well into the pack I had to keep running past the finish line to the beach. I was afraid they might be out of commemorative mugs that the first 35 finishers and the first 35 finishers into the water get. By Gosh, if I'm going to swim in the Atlantic Ocean on January first, I'd better get a mug.

I shouted "Bring the camera and my towel!" to my wife as I ran by shucking clothes and shoes. I asked the guy (drinking beer) guarding the mugs if he had enough left. He said they had plenty so I slowed down to finish stripping to my shorts and get my courage up.

By this time a big crowd of spectators had formed to cheer the idiots on. I stopped, turned to the crowd, took a bow, ran down the beach and into the surf. I dove into the face of one of the four foot breakers crashing there. You have to go under for it to count.

The temperature of the Atlantic Ocean in January is 36 degrees Fahrenheit. After your heart starts beating again and you remove your testicles from your armpits, it's quite refreshing. You're all heated up from the 10k and it makes a nice, if rapid, cool down. It's particularly medicinal to your achy legs as a nice ice-water soak.

We were all struggling in the high surf with rubbery and numb legs. Salisbury Beach is one of those beaches with a steep tidal shelf that you have to climb back up. The undertow was a bit testing with dead legs and cryogenically conditioned muscles, but we made it back up to collect our mugs and towel off for the ride home.

If you've never done it, I would recommend a swim in the Atlantic in January and the Hangover Classic is a good way to warm up for it.

Nor'easters don't dampen the spirits of the New England runner

Introduction:

I love running in the snow. I mean while it's snowing. The hiss of the snow covers all noise and makes it like running in a sensory deprivation tank. Being the introspective, self-centered nut that I am, I like being alone with myself inside a snow storm.

I wrote this after looking forward to the Mill Cities race in 2003 it got cancelled because of a big storm. I went out and ran in the woods instead and formulated this bit in front of a roaring fire when I got back.

As a matter of fact, we like it!

Massachusetts, Sunday December 8, 2003.

It snowed off and on for three days. Not the slushy, rainy snow that we usually get in December, but the small-flaked, cold weather, fluffy variety of more northern climes. Gusting winds of 30-40 MPH drove the fluff sideways and sculpted modern-art-shaped drifts around the bushes and trees.

All the local clubs were supposed to run the Mill Cities Relay on Sunday, but that was cancelled by Saturday morning. I was let down. This is the healthiest I've felt in two years and I was looking forward to testing myself on the long flat 9.2 leg that I've not run before.

It's not like we New Englanders haven't run in the snow before. In fact, living in New England, most of us average runners don't mind the inclement weather. It comes with the territory. Not only do we expect it, we tend to revel in it. It is, in a way, a badge of honor for us. We like to tell war stories.

Some of our favorite races are designed to build that strength of character that we like to define ourselves by, that legendary Yankee toughness that we aspire to.

Take the Derry New Hampshire 16 Miler Boston Prep race in January for instance. It's not enough for us to run 16 miles over a series of $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile steep hills in the dead of winter, we have to do it howling blizzards and ice storms.

The weather at this race is legendary. In 1999 I didn't have the privilege, but many local runners ran in the freezing rain on a course that forced them off the road and into the woods to find some traction.

I ran Derry in 2000, during a snowstorm that dumped 6-8 inches of snow on the course while we ran. We were confined to a single tire track where we could get enough traction to struggle up the hills. Rarely have I seen people having so much fun. It was a hoot. Last year it was around 10 degrees. The police tried to call the race, but we all plodded through it, frozen stiff as boards.

Another legendary New England 'tester' is the Martha's Vineyard 20 Miler. The T-shirts boast "No Weenies". Anyone who has shared the experience knows that the T-shirts are appropriate.

It's an absolutely beautiful course, down the coast of Martha's Vineyard and back across the island on the plowed bike path. I joined a couple hundred hardy souls last year. We took the ferry over to the start. The police shortened the course to 18 miles because of all the snow. The temperature was a balmy 5 degrees with a soothing sea breeze to boot. I had my fleece sweater hood cinched up to just an eyehole to peer out of. By the end of the race my sweater was so stiff I couldn't bend my arms!

The bike path was plowed, but when the sun came out briefly, it created smooth ice patches in all the low areas. I went down twice, once while turning to warn the person behind me! You'd plant your foot on what looked like an innocent shadow and whomp! Head over heels. Once again, something to tell the grand kids about.

One of the other loony races I frequent is a sports bar 10k on New Years Day morning at 8:00 AM that offers participants a free mug if they take a dip in the ocean after the race. (That's the Atlantic Ocean folks), and some of those runners do it!

Then of course there is the hilly "Stu's 30k", another local punisher. This one lets the locals know who's ready to toe the line in Hopkinton a month or so later.

It just goes to show you that people, especially runners, can create fun out of almost any circumstances. In New England we have cold snowy weather, so we suit up, go out and have fun with it.

I was disappointed to have Mill Cities postponed, but I got over it by running a 10k training run...on the trails...in the woods...cutting my own path happily through the drifts and feeling sorry for those poor people who have to live in boring places like California, Florida and Australia, where there's only one season. Bunch of weenies.

Dreading another Delightful Derry

Introduction:

This race is a classic love-hate race for New Englanders. It appeals to people who have the mentality of “if I can do this, I can do anything”. The weather usually is awful. The hills are brutal. I’ve seen people reduced to tears at the end. At the same time, you will know you’ve run a race and you will know whether or not you are in shape.

I saw a guy die at the end of this race, no kidding, actually keel over and die, right in front of me.

Well, if you tell New England runners that a race is hard and brutal they’ll show up in happy masochistic droves. Most importantly, how often do you get to use the words “fuzzy codpiece” in your life?

Sixteen miles uphill in three-degree weather with a headwind...now that’s a race!

Sitting here, comfortably ensconced on my couch, in front of a roaring fire, it’s hard to imagine what we did this morning. We ran the Derry Boston Prep 16 Miler. ‘We’, being myself and a couple hundred other hardy souls. (I’m sure it will be easier to believe when the Advil wears off).

That’s Derry New Hampshire. (It’s one of the states in the upper right hand corner of your map). The overarching themes at Derry are a hilly course that the organizers classify (with tongue firmly in cheek) as ‘moderately challenging’, combined with cataclysmic weather events.

We didn’t get a snowstorm this year. Or an ice storm. Or a plague of locusts, for that matter, but it was pretty chilly. A nice, sunny, one-degree day, with a five to ten mile an hour breeze.

The runners getting suited up before the race, in the gym, looked like they were preparing to accompany Shackleton on an ill-fated jaunt to the pole. Dollops of petroleum jelly were being liberally spread on faces and other pointy bits. Many layers were laid in against the cold.

I chatted up a couple of runners. The gist of my questioning was, “Why are you doing this?”

Alison, from Danvers, said that she was training for a marathon and heard that this was a good training race, but she had an apprehensive, ‘what am I getting myself into’ look about her. I comforted her by saying that, in my opinion, this is the hardest middle-distance race in New England. (Inspirational, huh?)

I talked to a local Derry runner. He was angry about the weather, had been training on the course, and also had a 'why the heck am I doing this?' whine going.

There was another nice lady who said it was one of her favorite races and she ran it every year.

At one point I told some ladies waiting in line for the ladies room that there were porta-potties outside, and the line was much shorter. They looked at me like I was from Mars and said "Outside?"

The reigning sentiment was one of challenge and camaraderie. Most of these runners were local club veterans who attend Derry every year as a rite of passage on the way to Boston. The feeling seems to be "If I can do this and survive, I can do anything." For many, this is their longest long run to date in preparation for the spring marathon season, (especially the one that starts in Hopkinton on Patriots Day).

It was definitely balaclava weather. I brought my fuzzy hat with me, thinking it might get warmer, and I could switch. It didn't. It turned out for the best though, because I ended up stuffing my hat down the front of my tights for an impromptu fuzzy codpiece.

Derry is a challenging course with a number of hills. The biggest of these hills is a whopper that starts around mile ten and ends around mile twelve. It has a tendency to let you know what kind of shape you're really in. This is where we passed all the people who have been kidding themselves about their training.

Did I mention that it was cold? In the places where we turned into the wind it bit pretty hard. One interesting innovation was warm Gatorade at the water stops. How great is that? As a counter balance, the water had ice floating in it. The bottle I carry with me froze solid by mile ten and I had to throw it away.

I met the usual mix of interesting characters. There was a guy wearing shorts, (there always is). When we passed him on the hill he didn't look very happy. He may still be out there. They'll find him in the spring.

There was a hatless guy with ice chunks in his crew cut. He said he worked outside for a living and 'was used to it'. He did seem much happier than shorts-guy.

One gentleman had big, dangling chunks of ice hanging off his hat, like chandelier earrings. I'm sure you'll see plenty of shots of him in the race photos. He was happy too. Everyone I met was happy. We all whined a bunch, but we had a blast and got a great workout.

That is the theme and the 'take-away' from this race. Everyone loves it for the spectacle. Hundreds of hoarfrost covered runners stomping along like crazy

musk oxen. It's a right of passage for us in New England. If you come out strong, you're pretty confident about running 26.2 thirteen weeks from now. If it kicks your butt, you know you have to start getting serious.

I had a great race. It's challenging, but fun. It's just the kind of wacky thing we like to do to break up the winter doldrums. Bring on Boston. Heartbreak is like skiing on the kiddie-slope after Derry!

Derry – 2005 race report

Introduction:

This is a race report that I wrote for my running club after Derry in 2005. It is a bit sparse, but I thought it should be included as a book end to the previous year's story.

2005 was the warm year...

I just got back to my sumptuous Holiday Inn hobbit hole from a run in Quebec City. It's Winter Carnival up here this week and there are lots of things going on in the old city. They have an ice palace and ice sculptures and all sorts of parties going on. Last year at this time it was so cold you needed a NASA issued space suit to go outside. Tonight it isn't even freezing and the ice sculptures are looking like blobs and falling over!

I'm still a little achy from the Derry race, but everything seems to be functional. The Squannacook River Runners were well represented at Derry. Dave Wilder had to spend some time with his wife and didn't make the race, but I did meet up with John Cole, Brian Reeves and Frank Row. Supposedly Andrea Myer was going, but I didn't see her name in the results. Ted managed to hurt himself over-training last week and had to bail out too. There were plenty of Groton Road Race flyers on the table for people to take.

414 runners finished. Casey Moulton won it averaging 5:20's! I can't run that fast to do one lap on the track and he can do it for sixteen miles up and down those killer hills! God love him.

Derry is one of the hardest courses in New England. It is hard because it is purposely designed to run up and down every steep hill in the area. It was postponed for two weeks this year because of the blizzard. Typically 'bad weather' is the nom de guerre for Derry. I have run it 3 times before, once in a howling blizzard, twice in single digit temperature with a stiff wind. When they said it was cancelled for weather it didn't seem right.

The race was run this past Sunday as the make up date. The weather was perfect. It was sunny and warm. It was probably 35 degrees at the start and 40 degrees at the finish. I wore my thong Speedo. Ha! Just kidding! But now you'll be haunted by that mental image for weeks. A lot of people over dressed and were miserable. Plenty of people in shorts too.

Derry is a race people run after they've been training for Boston for a couple months and are starting to feel good about their conditioning. Derry is like a cold slap in the face and reminds everyone of what kind of shape they are actually in. I told one of the youngsters who was running it for the first time that a good

strategy would be to walk the up-hill and the down-hill sections and just run the flat bits. That would reduce the part you have to run to about a ½ a mile.

The smart runners go out easy at Derry. The not-so-smart runners who go out fast have an opportunity to practice their death-shuffle for Boston. There is one particularly nasty climactic climb around the 10-11 mile range that really knocks the stuffing out of people.

I passed a man and woman who were walking late in the race. The man was consoling the woman about how she had plenty of time left to train for Boston and not to worry about it, etc. When I passed I assured her that, no doubt about it, Derry was indeed a much harder course than Boston. I ran with Steve Molan from CoolRunning for awhile too.

I ran with John for a couple miles until he got sick of listening to me talk and shoed me away. I never saw Frank and Brian after the start because they are in much better shape than I am right now and ended up running a speedy 7:30ish pace.

Whether you race it or jog it, the race is a heck of a work out and more than 'moderately challenging'.

Who's joining us for Martha's Vineyard in a couple weeks? It's a hoot.

Mill Cities...and the Flu

Introduction:

This was the reschedule of the original December 8th race that I was whining about in an earlier story. We finally got to run it. This is a club tradition for us and I've run all of the legs except one.

This also allowed me to scientifically test whether having the intestinal flu makes you faster, (because you're much lighter), or slower, (because you're much weaker). The answer below...

A great event (even if you're sick)

8:00 AM, Sunday Morning, in the chill wind of a New Hampshire morning, the ceremonial red brick was dropped and 103 teams lit out for Lawrence in the 20th anniversary Mill Cities Relay. There were 103 teams of 5 members each, or 515 local club runners. These folks chose, (mostly of their own free will), to wake up early and go race in the cold. That's a testament to the vibrancy of the New England running community.

This is an invitation-only club relay race with Dave Camire as the director. It has 28.3 miles spread over 5 legs from Nashua, NH to Lawrence, MA. Usually it is held in December as a celebratory close to the year's racing season, but this year we got snowed out, and it was postponed until February 9th.

The invitees are, (loosely), the clubs in the Greater Merrimack Valley area. The course follows the Merrimack River. The theme of the race is the river and the many turn-of-the-century red brick mills in Nashua, Lowell and Lawrence that lend their existence to harnessing its power.

You can tell by looking at this crowd that they are veterans. There were lots of team uniforms. The race attire was well worn and functional. No pretenders or posers in this crew. Lot's of old friends, hand shaking, tall tales, boasting and warm embraces. It's like a big family reunion. (A strange family where all the uncles and aunts are runners)

A quick note to Mother Nature...Enough already! It's not funny anymore! Ok, you win; we're all sick of winter, now give us some shorts weather!

The race weather was around 20 degrees with a strong wind. The good news was that it was a tail wind for most of the course. The bad news was when you turned into it. Ouch. Can you say, "Flash freeze"?

There was freezing rain the Friday before. The first two legs had ice, especially in exchange zones that added some excitement. At one point, a 24 ft panel truck decided to take a detour through the first exchange zone, that is in an industrial

park. Picture the racers rounding the corner on a big patch of ice and running straight into the back of a big truck!

Leg two was all ice covered on the back roads, forcing runners to tread cautiously. Exchange zone two, the tunnel at the Voke School, was iced over too, making for a slippery kick into the finish.

I was signed up for leg-4, the long leg. I'm in training, so the prospect of 9.4 miles didn't worry me...until I caught the intestinal flu and spent all day Saturday on the floor.

I've always wondered when I read those articles about an Olympic athlete who, after years of training, doesn't show up for the big race because "they had the flu". In my mind I picture a bad case of the sniffles and think "What a wimp". Now I know better.

I figured it could go one of two ways. First, I reasoned, I might have a good day on Sunday. My logic being that I was a good 8-10 pounds lighter from the intense carbo-unloading on Saturday. On the other hand, I thought I might experience some energy problems in the high miles.

Turns out, I was right on both counts. If it had been a 2-mile race, I would have had a great day. If it had been a 5-mile race, I would have had a good day. If it had been a 10k, I would have been happy. Those last 3 miles were a death march.

Ah...well, live and learn. Those who had no excuses loved the easy down hill and the strong tail wind. These were definitely PR conditions in the last two legs with that strong following wind.

The strange running family reunion moved to the warm Knights of Columbus hall in Lawrence at the finish. There were awards, cold beer and warm food for all the uncles and aunts. This is one fun, well-organized event. If you haven't run it yet, find a local club and get yourself and four friends invited next year.

2004 Martha's Vineyard

Introduction:

This is another race that I run every year, (when I can). It is isolated and beautiful. I usually take my family down with me and let them wander the abandoned tourist towns while I'm out on the course. The president of my graduating prep school class, Kevin Keady, lives out on Chappaquiddick now, working on a farm and playing in a band. I talked to him at my 25th reunion this year. He's recorded some great music you should look up. Always was a nice guy. MV is a good fit for him. It's a great place to run or just be in the off season.

A walk on the beach

It's 4:00 AM and I can't sleep. I ran the Martha's Vineyard 20 miler yesterday, and for some reason my quads are achy. It wasn't the hills. There weren't any. I must be getting old.

It was beautiful yesterday. It was in the mid-40's and sunny. Except for the substantial breezes it would have been perfect race weather. Compared to the arctic blasts we have been suffering it was perfect.

The sun felt so good as I walked the beach at Vineyard Haven prior to the start. The Atlantic was clear and cold. The shells crunched underfoot. The fishing boats bobbed at anchor. A couple of gulls fishing in the shallows let me know what they thought of my intrusion with perturbed squawks.

February in New England is a crapshoot, but if you catch a good day, there is no prettier, friendlier race than this one.

We really dodged a bullet weather-wise this year. The race managed to be 12 hours on the warm side of a front. If we were to run this morning, it would be in single digit cold with a gale force snow.

Last year we ran a snow shortened 18-mile course in a bone chilling 3-degree breeze on dangerous ice-covered bike paths. A couple years ago a front rolled through during the day making a race that was half Jekyll and half Hide.

That's New England for you. If you don't like the weather wait a bit, it will change.

Martha's Vineyard is an island snuggled up close to the south side of Cape Cod. There's less than 10 miles of the Atlantic Ocean separating the island from Woods Hole, but there's no road. To get over to the island you have to take a ferry.

This isolation has allowed Martha's Vineyard to keep its charm and resist development. The island is an interesting place. It's a beautiful Massachusetts seafaring locale preserved in time. The towns are lined with well-ordered white-clapboard Victorian houses. The sea caresses miles of white sand beaches.

In some aspects it is just a collection of Massachusetts towns like any other. In the summer it becomes a tourist bonanza with Bostonians taking the ferry over for day trips to the beaches. In the winter, life goes on. The island is known for its rich and famous residents, and you might still get a nice little summer cottage for under a million bucks.

I drove down in the morning and caught the 8:15 AM Ferry. It's a 45-minute ride with a bunch of runners, youth hockey teams (who can't sit still) and locals, (who must wonder who all these anemic people in tights are).

There were white caps in Nantucket Sound and the ferry wallowed a bit in the wind driven seas. When we docked at Vineyard Haven it was already warm and the sun was climbing.

Chatting up the runners in the basement of the Catholic Church I confirmed that this is a different crowd than your average weekend 10k. Most of these folks are on track for the Boston Marathon and use this race as a scenic training run. You hear the phrase "Oh, it's just a training run for me", but you know that once they get out there, it's a race. The field is mostly veterans.

I really like this race. It's small with only a couple hundred people. It seemed smaller than last year, probably because the snow-and-ice-artic-horror-show race of last year scared some people off. This race is beautiful, especially those sections along the beach, and (don't tell anyone) it's easy.

The course starts at the ferry terminal and runs along the coast 'down island' towards Edgartown, (in the direction of infamous Chappaquiddick of Teddy Kennedy fame). The track follows the bike path on Beach Road for the first 9 miles.

The beach is a narrow sandy spit that separates the Atlantic from Sengekontacket pond, where yesterday there was a fisherman clamming from his skiff amid the ice chunks. One of the fun things about this part of Massachusetts is the names that have been borrowed from the indigenous peoples, (like 'Massachusetts').

There was a strong quartering wind down the Beach Road path that pushed the runners along by their right shoulder. Everyone ran their first nine miles at a pace 30 seconds per mile faster than they had planned. You just had to, with the nice bike path surface, the flat beauty of the beach and that wind pushing from the side. If we were smart we could have rigged a jib and a spinnaker to make even better time down wind.

In Edgartown the course turned back up island along a bike trail directly into the wind and unsheltered for a couple miles. This definitely took the snap out of a lot of people's sails. If you were to look at the splits, you'd see that we gave some of that fast start back here, and people began to wonder if letting the wind pull them out so fast in the beginning was such a great idea after all.

It was still warm and sunny when we ducked back into the shelter of a scrub oak covered bike trail at mile 12. Some people dialed it back to catch their breath, but I only passed one distraught walker. The rest of the race was an easy walk-in-park bike path. There was nothing to do but roll on home to the finish.

The race finished at the elementary school. There were the traditional hot soup and bagels, including a wonderful clam chowder. The school graciously let's us use the locker rooms and showers, which is a definite plus. I would not want to ride the ferry back in wet salty clothes. The race tee's were bright orange this year with the traditional "No Weenies" moniker on the sleeve.

Everyone was happy. They were happy with the weather and they were happy with their times. This is an easy race. Compared to your normal New England race or training loop, it's flat as a pancake. It's a fast course. Everyone that I talked to on the ferry back had a great day and beat their training targets. Some set PR's.

If you want a Valentines Day weekend getaway with an easy 20 mile race thrown in at a pretty seaside venue, this is the recommended race. Keep an eye on the forecast though, because you never know when a gale is going to blow in.

Martha's Vineyard 2005

Introduction:

This is a race report from the next year that I've included for continuity. This race and this place is still a natural wonder.

Bachelor pad hideaway

The Martha's Vineyard 20 Miler is a pretty race in February that has become a late winter tradition for many Boston bound trainees. It starts in Vineyard Haven at the Ferry terminal and runs around the island on a flat twenty mile loop. It's a good race for practicing your pacing strategies, because, unlike many of the other local races, it is flat.

They close off the race at 500 runners. Post entries were still being taken on Saturday morning at the ferry terminal, but it looked like the crowd was close to that number.

We went over Friday afternoon. We had the great fortune to have a local with us. Dave's parents had built a cottage there in 1978 and when they got tired of it, Dave took it over. He has been spending vacations down there since he was a kid. As a result, not only did we have a place to stay, but we had an 'Islander' for a guide.

Martha's Vineyard, being an island, is typically reached by boat. Massachusetts runs a ferry out of Woods Hole. Dave took his car over. We had reservations and just drove on the boat. Since it was school vacation and Presidents Day weekend, the ferry hold was full.

Dave's cottage is a log house on a secluded lot surrounded by island oak. The cottage is not a lean-to in the woods. It is a fully functional little dwelling with all the comforts of home. The pine logs are exposed and the inner walls and floors are all knotty pine board as well. The downstairs is an open kitchen-dining-sitting room with a wood stove. There is a full bath and an office on the first floor as well. Upstairs is an open loft with 3 bedrooms and another bath.

We took the 7:35 ferry over. As we were getting on the boat I realized I had forgotten my number. (They mail them out before the race) I called my wife to see if she would be interested in driving to the Cape early in the morning to bring it to me. She wasn't, but she gave me the phone numbers off of the race packet. I called the office and got the race director's phone number. I called her cell phone and left a message. Believe it or not, she called me back and we had a nice chat. They just give you a new number at registration. No problem. She even invited me to the party after the race. Cathy was very nice.

We drove the winding back roads of the Vineyard to the cottage. When we arrived we hit the ground like a SWAT team. Dave turned on the water, the heat and got the pot boiling for pasta. John brought in the wood and got a fire going in the wood stove. I sat down and changed the phone number on a couple hundred race applications.

Friday night it was 15 degrees and the wind was howling. We had pasta, meatballs and liquid carbohydrates for dinner. We told lies and talked race strategy and sat by the fire reading. I hooked up my laptop and played some Little Feat for ambience.

We bedded down around 10:00 PM with dreams of 20 miles in our heads.

John was up making coffee at 6:30 AM. We began our pre-race rituals. They had oatmeal and peanut butter on english muffins. I had coffee, Gatorade and Power Bars. One funny thing is that John bought low-calorie english muffins by accident! Here they are trying to carbo-load with low-cal muffins!

We all girded for the long race. Dave put on his nip-guards. John slathered his foot blisters with goop. I taped my big toes against black toenail. We loaded up on Gu and Gatorade and grease.

We checked the weather on the internet. 28 degrees at race time with a 12 MPH NNW wind. Not too bad. When we left the cottage at 10:00 it was still 17 degrees but there was virtually no wind and it was a bright, warm winter sun. Cool. This race can be a pain if it's windy because the first 10 miles are down-wind and the last 10 turn back into it.

We went down to Vineyard Haven and parked. There were many runners wandering around town. The Play House was the designated warm up area and we went in there to finish greasing up our pointy bits and preparing.

The race got underway at 11:00 AM from the ferry terminal. We had a rousing sing-along of the Star Spangled Banner followed by a blast from a home-made cannon and we were off. There were lots of serious runners. No casual sweat-pants and high-tops types here. There were many BAA logos and skinny people.

I hung with John and Dave for the first couple miles goofing along at a comfortable jog. The day was beautiful, sunny and felt warmer than the 28 degrees. None of us were 'racing' this was just a long run to gain strength for Boston. The course is very pretty and runs down the coast of the island, right along the beach for the first 10 miles. The snow had almost all melted away and the course was dry. No ice to speak of and it was cold enough to keep it from getting sloppy. The course is mostly a tar bike path.

Dave and John shooed me off after a couple miles and I jogged ahead. The crowd was dense back in the pack. I met up with Steve from CoolRunning

again. He was running with a group of women who said that they had placed first overall in the Beach to Beacon relay. The day was so beautiful and the company was so entertaining that the miles peeled off quickly.

The one tricky part of this race, from the previous three times I've run it, is when you turn the corner at mile 10. There are a couple miles where the course is open with no real protection. In previous years (like last year) we have turned the corner into the teeth of a gale and it takes the fight out of you. This year there was barely a breeze to contend with. It was great.

It strings out a little here with runners well separated in ones and twos. I chatted up a lady named Carolyn and we had a great talk between 11 and 15. We were so immersed in our conversation that we dropped our pace down to a 7:40 at one point and were passing people by the handfuls.

I lost her at a water stop around 15 and went on alone. The weather was still fine and the bike path was sheltered by scrub pine. The bike path follows the contours of the land and has shallow climbs and dips. Nothing you could call a 'hill', just typical Cape Cod rollers.

After mile 16 I started to stiffen up a little, but not too bad. I continued to pass people. There were more and more people walking, especially in the last three miles. You think "Of course there were people walking, it's a 20 mile race", but there is something about this particular race that has people burning out in the high miles. We surmised that it might be that people are not quite in as good shape as they think or maybe the flatness of the course pulls them out too fast. Maybe the course is too flat for people used to running in New England. I don't know, but I'll take being the 'passer' over being the 'passee' any day.

I tried stretching out on the little hills to break up my stiff glutes a little and kept moving. I had "Dixie Chicken" running through my head and decided that this was a good thing. The last mile tilts down hill a little and the finish is a good ¼ mile down a dirt path. I love races that finish down hill.

I had passed a knot of people at the last water stop and as I crossed the road onto the dirt path I heard footsteps. Someone was trying to take me about 15 feet back. I stretched out my stride on the down hill and picked it up a little each time the footsteps closed. They didn't know I was tired and if I put up a fight they might get discouraged and back off. We were wheeling pretty fast as we ran through the shoot. I turned around and it was Carolyn! I gave her a hug. What the heck? Great race.

My hamstrings and gluteus are a little tight, but the knee feels fine and the Achilles are hanging in there. Nothing broken, nothing pulled and not even any nasty chafing! Ok, I'm slow, but 20 miles is 20 miles and I'm still moving forward!

This race has hot showers! Man I love hot showers after a long cold race! The only hard part is bending your legs to get your stuff off. When Dave and John

were showering, some dude keeled over. The EMT's had to come and get him. Yikes!

The race has cool long sleeve shirts without ads and with the distinctive "No Weenies" logo on the arm. Definitely a keeper. Hot chowder too. Way cool. And, lots of Groton Road Race applications.

We shuffled onto the schools bus and caught a ride back to Vineyard Haven. We easily made the 3:45 ferry back. There were lots of skinny people limping around the boat. I left Dave and John to fight about who had to drive home and met my wife, kids and dog at the ferry terminal in Woods Hole. We went out for a nice seafood dinner (on me).

Great day. Great Fun. Great race. Do it next year!

Eastern States 20

Introduction:

I wrote two articles for the Eastern States. This one was the first. I'm a man of habit, especially when it comes to racing and the ES20 has become one of my habits. It's not a particularly pretty race, but when you're in training and it is your last long run before Boston, it has the right element of seriousness for me.

Down hill from ME to MA with a tail wind – Local runners build confidence for Boston.

It seems like I've been running a lot of races by the ocean lately. The Eastern States 20 Miler is definitely 'by the ocean'. Most of the time, the surf is crashing on the rocks just a few yards off of your left shoulder.

This is a race that hugs the Eastern coastline from Kittery Maine, through the entirety of the New Hampshire seaboard, to Salisbury Massachusetts. Three states, one race. (Things are smaller out here in New England - another few miles and you could tie in Rhode Island and Vermont too).

A few hundred runners joined me for the ES 20. It makes a huge difference when you don't have to run alone. There were many representatives of local running clubs.

Most of the runners use this race as a 'training run' for Boston and are at or near the peak of their training programs. This makes for interesting dynamics. Everyone looks lean and strong. This is their last long run before the taper into Hopkinton.

Since it's a point to point race you have to either take a bus or get someone to shuttle you. This year, as in previous years, I was able to lure my wife and kids with the promise of a seafood dinner to give my buddies and me a ride up from Hampton Beach to the starting line.

I hooked up with some of the Merrimack Valley Striders who are at the end of a tough marathon run-up program that includes twice-a-week coached work outs. I already ran a marathon a couple weeks ago, so I'm just trying to maintain fitness and not get injured.

These guys are strong and pretty fast. I harbored some trepidation that, despite all the "It's just a training run" talk, they'd drag me out too fast and I'd founder on the rocks coming in like I did the last two times I've run this race.

One of the crew, my running buddy Frank, had a great new toy. He had one of those wrist-based GPS doohickeys that could instantaneously tell us how fast we

were going and how far we had gone. It was very cool and quite useful. He bought it as a present for his wife! What a typical guy thing to do. Too funny! We referred to him any time we needed to know the pace or if the mile marks were accurate.

The weather forecast had been changing all week. Right up until gun time people were fretting over what to wear. Some were in shorts and tees, some were in long tights and sweaters. I think the shorts ended up being the right choice. It ended up being fairly warm, in the low 40's. I was hot and sweat-soaked in the early miles with only shorts and a long sleeve Coolmax.

Saturday night I was watching the weather and you know those oversized cartoon-graphic arrows that they use to represent the wind direction? The weatherman drew a big one of those with the point aimed right at the starting line. I turned to my wife with manic grin and said, "Tail Wind!"

A sizable wind it was. The sea breeze was blowing in off the water at 15-25 mph, mostly on our backs, (thank you running gods).

I've heard some complaints about this race. I've heard, "Too much highway", "not enough traffic control", and "not enough support". To some extent it's a question of expectations. This is not a family fun-run. It's basically a runners race and it doesn't claim to have the density of amenities that larger everyman oriented events have.

The last three miles coming over the bridge on Rte 1A into Salisbury are about as grim a stretch of highway you would want to find. It is especially grim if you're hitting the wall, (been there, done that).

But, as a last long training run, with a bunch of Boston primed runners, it's great. We actually liked the wide 'highway' sections because we could run on the soft shoulder and get off the pavement to save our old joints and tendons.

The race starts from Traip Academy, across a wood plank bridge into the scenic center of Portsmouth N.H. The course is serpentine, following the outline of the coast along sandy coves and broken granite points. The Atlantic Ocean, moderately angry from the wind, is constantly just over the hedge. When you can't see the big green breakers throwing themselves at the rocks, you can hear them.

The course is flat, and even though it gets strung out, you always have some company.

There isn't much shelter, and despite the tail wind it still beats you up. We ended up wind-burned and tired.

The scenery is typical seacoast New England. There are plenty of salt water creeks and marshes filled with gulls, ducks, and at one point, a pair of majestic

white swans cruised in a pond alongside the course. Cape Cod styled clap board houses, fishing boats, old lobster traps and the pungent smell of the ocean at low tide keep you company.

We planned to go out easy and kick in at the end with negative splits. The three guys from MVS were in better shape than I and pulled me out to a crisp training pace. We were a bit faster than our target pace, but we made up for it by stopping a lot to walk the water stops and visit the porta-johns along the way. Before we knew it we were pulling into Hampton beach and it was too late to worry about pacing.

At mile 18 the three studs stopped at the last water stop. I ran through it to maintain my momentum. We geared down and got serious. They caught me at the bridge, and we dropped the pace to bring it in hotter. They left me, but I picked it up and kept going strong too.

Twice before this race has kicked my butt at the bridge, but not this day. I got within myself and made it in to the finish just fine. There were a couple of mattresses discarded on the shoulder around 19.5 and I was impressed by the irony.

We finished with negative splits and a dash of confidence to bring with us to Hopkinton on Patriots day. Wind-blown and spent, we all went to Brown's for fried clams and lobster rolls. It was a good day for all.

The last two miles of this race brought home an important aspect of distance running. Running is 80% mental. Instead of hitting the wall, I managed to 'disconnect'. Those of you who have had the experience know what I'm talking about. It's when your self becomes separated from your body. You look down and see your legs churning as if they are someone else's.

If you successfully disconnect, it's like your torso is riding a magic carpet. I find I can do this when I run the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the race smart. Not slow, but smart. If you go too slowly, you don't get the effect. If you go too fast and build up the debt, your body shuts down.

If you do run smart, in the high miles you can detach and let your momentum and stride bring you in. It creates a mental barrier to the pain and effort. It's not effortless running, it's more like a cruise control.

It is something that you can practice. The body/mind connection can be trained. You have to run the razor edge between too slow and too fast. You have to balance performance and strength with debt and exhaustion. It all comes together magically at the end of the race. You know you had a 100% effort and there is nothing left in the tank.

Next time you close your eyes to visualize that pending long race, see yourself with a couple miles to go dropping it into cruise control. Picture your mind

leaving your body, or more precisely, your body leaving your mind. See yourself channel the physical effort and pain into strength. Tune out the wasting noise. Set your body on cruise and ride your magic carpet through the finish.

Eastern States 20 Miler – Race report 2005

Introduction:

My race report for the ES20 2005.

Too many nice days in a row – I'm starting to get suspicious!

The race was held on Saturday this year because Sunday was Easter. Traditionally this race is three weeks prior to Boston so you can get your final long run in. Many use it to test their pacing skills and overall conditioning.

Friday night found us scrambling for a ride to Kittery. Since it is a point-to-point race you can't leave your car at the start. I guess you could, but you'd have to run 20 miles back to get it. Traditionally my wife gives us a ride in exchange for some seafood, but she had plans. Frankly after 20 years of marriage and 10 years of marathons, she is getting rather non-sympathetic about my weekly adventures. We were worried that we would be relegated to the race provided shuttle bus like the rest of the running riff raff.

Frank's brother-in-law was visiting from North Carolina and Frank conned...convinced him that he should visit Maine on his trip. I met Brian and Chuck in Littleton and we commuted up to Seabrook to park at the finish.

When we parked in a dirt lot by the finish a guy drove up looking for \$5 to park. He was like something out of a Quentin Tarantino film noir epic. Big, fat guy in a beat up Ford van with the remains of a White Owl Blunt clenched in his teeth at 8:45 in the morning. Boxes of cigars on the dashboard amid sundry other debris. Brian and I are thinking that we are basically buying this guy coffee or ripple. I asked him for a receipt and he scribbled 'paid' on the back of a torn off cigar box. Too funny.

We piled into Frank's van and drove the course backwards up to Kittery. This was helpful because we were able to spot some landmarks and way points along the course to use during the race. Any course G2 you can get is good because this one is notoriously hard to find the mile markers.

At the Traip Academy it looked like a good crowd. I would have guessed better than last year, but the final numbers were only 500+. The day was gorgeous. 45 degrees and not a cloud in the sky. People were flocking to the rest rooms to change out of their tights into shorts. Sunglasses were a must.

I've said that I love this race. It is a Spring tradition. I've run it at least three times. It's a pretty course (for the most part). It's basically a great measuring stick for your conditioning and will allow you to set strategy for Boston. Brian and

Frank had a plan to run 7:30's up to the 15 mile mark and then race the last 5 miles at faster than marathon pace. I had a plan to just run easy and finish healthy. Chuck's plan was similar to mine.

We went out before the race and warmed up. Frank and Brian did a pre-race three miler to warm up and Chuck and I did about a mile and a half. We came back and stretched in the sun, visited the traditional bush behind the dumpster and made our way up to the start.

This is one of those races where there is no national anthem or F16 fly-over. The race officials block off traffic and say "On your marks...Get set...Go!" Casey Moulton, who set a new course record running a 5:20 pace, was out of site by the first turn. Emily Levan from Maine came in 6th and set a new course record with a 6:06 pace.

As is tradition, we all forgot about our plans and took off too fast. Frank and Brian went out at a 6:40 pace and Chuck and I went out at a 7:30 pace. The mile marks are spray painted on the roads and very easy to miss. Confusion reigns on the course as we all try to figure out how fast we're going. The smart ones carry GPS devices. If you go out too fast at this course, you've got lots of company, because everybody does. On such a lovely day it would have been impossible to not run too fast!

I knew I was going too fast when I caught Rick and Dick Hoyt at the 5 mile mark. When I passed 8, I was averaging 7:30's and knew I was committed. I figured it could go either way and hoped it wouldn't end in a death march down Hampton Beach. I backed it off and tried to settle in to 8's to get comfortable.

They had GU on the course somewhere in the middle and I ate some, even though I never use the stuff, I figured the worst that could happen is it would make me sick and I'd have to slow down, (which was what I was trying to do). The course is flat with a little head wind. It's too spread out to draft. The ocean is over the hedge on your left. You go straight down 1A hugging the coast.

Around 15 my legs got a little tight and I started to despair that the death march might be beginning. I mentally slapped myself for being a wimp and tried to focus on relaxing and running my pace. When you run 20 miles you are going to be uncomfortable at points and you just have to deal with it and adjust. Mile 17 I think I lost some steam because a handful of people passed me.

Around 17.5 you look down Hampton beach and see the road dust swirling in clouds. It can be grim. Around Mile 18 I felt good and got ready for the last bit over the bridge and into the finish. The 18 mile mark was nowhere to be found, but I knew about where I was from previous years. There was some helpful guy right before the bridge yelling that there was 2.1 miles to go, which was wrong, I knew it was more like 1.7 because we measured it on the way up. 4/10 of a mile can be a lifetime at the end of a 20 miler.

Over the bridge there is a little hill; just enough to break up the monotony of flat that you had through Hampton. I started to pass runners walking. It is too bad to see people walking so close to the finish. I came in strong and felt great for just under 8 minute miles.

I felt so good that I started to talk myself into trying to qualify at Boston, but luckily I managed to talk myself out of it over the weekend. The deciding factor was I'd have to go on a diet!

Frank and Brian went out too fast, slowed down for the middle miles and then came charging in at race pace for the last five, running the last mile at a crisp 6:13 pace. Yikes! I hope the weather on Patriots day allows them to break 3 hours. Everyone pray for light drizzle and a tail wind for them.

We changed into some dry togs and went down the road to Brown's seafood for some tourist trap fare. Nothing like a big pile of fried clams after a long run! You'll notice the Seabrook Nuke plant over my left shoulder in the pictures. Great day, great race, great time. If the weather stays like this it's going to be 102 in the shade in Hopkinton!

New Bedford Half Marathon – Race Report 2005

Introduction:

This was a race report for my club. This is a cool race with a long and storied tradition.

Thar she blows! Beautiful day down in New Bedford

New Bedford is not a shy race. They have been doing this for 28 years and it shows. The race is big, but it is run like a well oiled machine. The fast people from all the regional running clubs show up and set a very competitive field, but there are lots of locals running for fun too.

I drove down with Brian Reeves. We left Littleton around 8:00 am and took 495 south all the way down to route 24, like going to the Cape. Brian has done this before and steered us to a parking lot right next to the registration.

In the race packet they gave away a free 2003 race tee. The one glitch they had was they were short on safety pins! The pins they gave us were the big diaper pin type and we ended up going to our secret stashes to get some small ones. I dropped some Groton applications on the table so we were represented there as well.

Brian is shooting for a sub-3 marathon and was using this race as a tempo run, shooting to break 6:30's. I on the other hand have done no speed work at all. I am just trying to stay healthy while my knee recovers and was using this as a nice long run.

The weather was great for New England running – low 40's - light breeze – mixed sun and clouds. We went through great deliberations on what to wear. Everyone is a little leery of the sea breeze on this course and it was clouding up a little. Brian wore shorts for speed and I opted for tights to keep my knee warm.

It is very obvious that this race is a big club run. It is a 2005 USATF half marathon championship race and there is a big team competition. MVS had more runners in this race than we have in our whole club! I'm pretty sure I was the only one in a SQRR singlet.

The other obvious thing about this race is that there are some really serious fast people. The timing is good for people running Boston. If you have been training, you are right about at your peak condition and working on fine tuning your speed.

Check out the numbers! 89 runners broke 6 minute miles. Yikes!

We met up with Ted and a car load of MVS runners that he came down with and ran a little warm up around the start.

The start is pretty tight for this race. They crammed 1340 runners into one street. There were pace signs, but I didn't see them and most people seemed to be ignoring them anyhow.

A peculiarity of this race is that they only had a timing mat at the finish line. There was no chip time because they don't capture it at the start. This caused the competitive types to jostle forward in the coral. I stayed way back and out of the way. I probably was too far back because it took me 37 seconds to cross the starting line and I was tripping over the sweat-pants-and basketball-shoes crowd for the first mile. I didn't cross the one mile mark until 8:30. I remember seeing a half-full 40 ounces beer bottle on the curb and wondering about the neighborhood.

We had some excitement in the first couple miles where there was an accident on the course. A motorcycle apparently got run over by a corvette. When Brian went by rider and motorcycle were still under the car. When I went by they were taking the guy away on a stretcher. (Editor's note: the motorcyclist was ok)

The course was hilly for the first few miles, but not uncomfortably so, just normal New England stuff. Then it went on a long downhill stretch that reminded me of the Ocean State Marathon course. There was a little head wind. I talked to Clint from Groton who runs with MVS for a while and practiced my nefarious drafting skills behind a series of unwitting accomplices. The surface was a nice soft asphalt and all the potholes had been filled. I made up some time and had some fun. I got warm and had to roll up my sleeves and take my gloves off.

At the bottom of this downhill bit the course turns into the ocean front. It runs along the coast for a couple miles. The sea breeze picked up considerably and hammered the runners here. Again I formed the lee of a covert phalanx and cruised along unimpeded.

The last bit of this race is the scary part that everyone talks about. The course takes back the downhills that it gave you previously starting at the 12th mile. Not having run it before, I didn't know what the appropriate level of dread should be.

After the beach the course turns back inland and into sheltering city streets. There were locals watching us and speaking Portuguese (I think), not very impressed by the whole thing. Just before mile 12 it heads uphill.

The hill wasn't a big deal. I actually would say that this is one of the faster courses I've run. It's a comfortable, shallow hill about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile long. It didn't bother me.

There were very few casualties along the road side. I saw maybe 1 or two walkers. In truth I noticed most people, even way back where I was, were running

negative splits. There seemed to be a little surge around the 10 mile mark. I reeled in a couple people on the hill, but no one was dying.

At the top of the hill the course takes a box-shaped 180 to bring you back to the start/finish. This part is very downhill and gives you a nice finishing momentum.

They gave out finishers medals to everyone and had Gatorade and water at the finish. Back at the registration they served up chowder and fish sandwiches.

It was a nice little jog. Very enjoyable. Fast course, well supported, good amenities. I'd recommend it.

Running with Bill

Introduction:

The subtitle says it all. Sometimes you get to meet your heroes!

The truth is that I didn't write this piece until a year later. I couldn't even think about the 8 seconds I missed my qualifying time by. It all turned out ok, but at the time I was a bit deflated and discouraged.

The true story of how I ran with Bill Rodgers and ran a qualifying time (sort of) at the Hyannis Marathon in 2004.

In 2004 the Hyannis Marathon was my quest. On the surface it looked like just another qualifying run, but in the end it was quite an adventure. It all came together on a beautiful, sunny, windy day in 2004, when I ran with Bill Rodgers and qualified (sort of).

The Hyannis Marathon and ½ Marathon is an event that means different things to different people. Each runner that walks nervously to the starting line on race day is a story. Each time a runner starts a race they start a new adventure. They may think they know how the adventure goes and how it ends, but they usually don't. On any race day an infinite number of adventures branch into the future. The runner in the starting corral does not know how the day will unfold, whether it will end with goals achieved or dreams shattered.

It is not just the elite runners that have adventures. It is the middle and back of the pack as well. Every runner who makes the commitment to start a long race is buying a ticket to a rollercoaster ride. To be truthful, that is that is why we do it. Each race we run is another opportunity to overcome. Runners like to face the chaos of human striving, to stare it down, to take on ourselves in single combat. Win or lose, we always learn something.

This story is a true story of one runner who ran the Hyannis Marathon in 2004 and had a grand adventure that is still being played out today. Like all race stories, this is a story of success, failure, and rebirth. This story could be the about any of the tens of thousands of mid-packers who step nervously to the starting line each year. This could be your story or your adventure or the adventure you are about to embark on. Next time you see a corral full of nervous runners, see it as the holding pen for a myriad of wonderful individual adventures about to begin.

Running with Bill

Around the eight or ninth mile of the marathon the first part of my 2004 Hyannis Marathon adventure started. It was the uphill section after you leave the beach and head back inland. I was running a tactical, veteran's race, right on pace with my qualifying time. It was just another day at the office for me, the culmination of four months of training, my 15th marathon. The weather was perfect and I was quite comfortable. The headwind along the coast had stiffened up a little bit, I had lost my pace pack and was running alone.

This little guy pulls up beside me and says "Hi!" I do a double take, like in a cartoon, and wonder if I've started to hallucinate, but it's too early in the race. Yes, it's William Henry Rodgers. Boston Billy in the flesh. Like most world-class marathoners, he's a smallish, wiry guy with no wasted body mass. I recognize him right away. I've read his book; I've seen his pictures in the paper since I was a little kid. He was setting records at Boston, New York and Fukuoka when I was running cross country in prep school.

We meet here on common ground in a race and there is no celebrity tension. If I had to meet Bill, I can't think of a better place than to do it. You have to understand, for a mid-pack marathoner who grew up in the 1970's, this is like meeting Elvis. It's just another jog for him.

He runs with me for a couple miles before checking his watch and pulling away effortlessly after the 10 mile mark. He's in a happy, talkative mood. Unlucky for him, but lucky for me, he's just coming off a broken leg. I know this because I read it in that month's running magazine. A broken leg is the only way you'd find him back in the pack running 7:30's with me. We talk about Boston and the course. I ask about his broken leg and how his running is coming. It's a great chat, like something I would imagine in my Walter Mitty moments.

Bill jokes with the spectators asking them if this is the right way to the finish and enjoys the reactions when they realize who they are talking with. He's a happy prankster on this day. Before he goes, I thank him for being an inspiration to a generation of runners; my generation of runners.

After all the miles, he just enjoys a jog at the beach - jogging with me. He is a great runner and, as it turns out, a great guy. When I get home I order a poster from the Bill Rodgers Running Center and ask them to have it signed, "Great running with you at Hyannis". I have it in the tube next to my desk. Some day, when my wife lets me build my shrine, I'll have it framed.

I grew up in Massachusetts and came of age in the late 70's and early 80's. Those were the days that are now referred to as the first running boom. Every Patriot's Day the T.V. (we only had 3 channels then kids) was saturated with marathon coverage. This same time period spawned the Hyannis Marathon.

Bill Rodgers was a hero, larger than life. Like Bobby Orr or Larry Bird. Bill was a Boston icon. He was not just an incredible athlete. He was a champion who broke the mold of the status quo in distance running. He didn't do it for pay. There was none then, he did it for a love of the sport.

There was something special about Bill in the 70's. There was an everyman quality about him that supported our Yankee ideals. It was Bill who won the marathon in cutoffs and a shirt he hand-lettered with a marker. It was Bill who set the American and Boston record while stopping to tie his shoe. Those times would still be in the top ten today, even with all the talk of Kenyan dominance.

The adventure Begins

I had gotten up early on that morning and drove alone the hour south to Cape Cod. (After your second or third marathon your family stops coming to watch, they just give you pitying looks, sigh and shake their heads.) The day was warm and calm. It was perfect marathon weather.

In the starting corral I sought out the other blue bibs and asked about pacing strategies. I get chatty at the start; it is a symptom of nervousness. There were a number of other runners in the corral looking to qualify that I could pace with. The gun sounded and we took off together into the morning Hyannis sun.

The Adventure unfolds

Hyannis is a pretty course. It is hard not to have a pretty course on Cape Cod with its long sandy beaches and ocean-front architecture. That wonderful salt smell of the Atlantic Ocean is always there. It reminds me of family vacations. As pretty as the course is, on this day I was all business hitting my splits plus-or-minus methodically.

Part of the adventure is finding that day's 'band of brothers' to pace with. There were several people trying to qualify at my pace and we banded together to form a phalanx. The first half of the race went according to plan.

Everything being equal I was on plan and on target as Boston Billy gave me a lift for a couple miles. As we finished the first loop the majority of the people peeled off to go eat pasta and those of us with the blue bibs forged ahead. The fun run was finished. Now the race was beginning.

What makes a marathon adventure vexing is that just when you need your math skills you lose them. Your body comes to the conclusion that if you're still running after this long something really bad must be chasing you and to keep moving is more important than addition and subtraction.

For a few miles I could not figure out where I was in relation to my meticulous plan. At these times you just put your mind away and focus on moving forward.

Oh No!

I came to mile 25 unable to do the math that would tell me if I was still on target. I knew I had lost some time, but I thought I should still have enough. I guessed that I was right on or maybe a little ways into the 59 second buffer that they give you.

Mile 26. Oh no! It dawns on me. I'm about to miss my goal time by seconds. I've got a little more than a minute to run a $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. I throw myself through the chute and look at the chip time. 3:21:08. I missed it by 8 seconds.

I was in shock. If only I had known sooner I'm sure I could have found 8 seconds. I felt like a deflated balloon.

As it turns out I *did* qualify.

The shock wore off. I didn't mourn my Hyannis 8 second screw-up. I was too busy. Life goes on. I tried to cheat on my training and got caught. Lesson learned, time to move on.

A month after Hyannis I ran Boston in the heat of Patriot's Day 2004. It was a miserable race and everyone was happy just to survive. I put Hyannis and Boston behind me and set my sites on a strong autumn qualifier. That wasn't to be. In June I totaled my truck on a telephone pole and mashed my patella tendon. I had to stop training and cease running until January 2005.

This is where it all comes back to Hyannis in March of '04 and those 8 seconds. It was January '05, I hadn't run in months. I needed a qualifying time for Boston and didn't have one. I figured 'what the heck' I'll send the application in anyhow with the 3:21:08 and see what happens.

A couple weeks afterwards my post card shows up. It turns out that sometimes the BAA will overlook 8 second indiscretions. I'm off to my 7th Boston Marathon, thanks to my Hyannis adventure last year with Boston Billy.

Every race is an adventure. I ran with Bill, and that was something I'll never forget. I lost my mind in the high miles and blew my plan. I didn't train well enough to overcome the vagaries of marathon vertigo and I won't forget that either. As it turns out, I did qualify for another Boston.

The life of a runner is full of lessons. Isn't that why we do it? Are you ready for an adventure? Come to Hyannis this year to run the $\frac{1}{2}$ Marathon or the Marathon. You never know what adventures await you and what will you learn about yourself.

Race Ennui

Introduction:

This is an interesting glance into the funk that missing Hyannis by 8 seconds put me into. Typical to my nature, when I want to wallow in self pity I get philosophical...

What do you do when the race has been run?

It's such a let down. Win or lose, good or bad, when you train for 6 months for a race what do you do the day after? Lick your wounds and over eat?

Is there some sort of marathon equivalent of postpartum depression?

That's the problem with setting goals; what do you do once you've achieved them?

The marathon takes a lot out of you, especially if you race it hard. The subsequent two days are spent hobbling around and avoiding staircases.

What about the mental fatigue? What do you do now? You wake up sore with nothing to do. You can wear the T-shirt. You can even wear the medal for a couple days. Then what?

Then the ennui sets in. The let down. The little death. You have climbed and climbed a steep mountain. You have pushed with a last great spasm of effort to the peak and now you are at the bottom again looking up.

Everyday for the last six months you were preparing for a run, recovering from a run or thinking about a run. The structure of your life is lost. How do you step down gracefully? How do you reprogram yourself for 'fun runs' without thinking "garbage miles"?

Do you consider upping the ante? Maybe run a marathon in every state? Maybe an iron-man? Maybe redouble your efforts to trim those 5-10 minutes off? That's a train ride that never stops at the station. When do you stop? At what point does your body give out and say "enough!"

Do you feel guilty? Do you feel like your cheating by not training anymore? Do you feel somehow, like you're letting yourself down? All that psychological pressure you gathered and focused to force you out of bed and into the cold for the last few months now has no useful outlet.

One might try to extend the training and target another marathon with 90 days. You've already got the conditioning. If you survived the race healthy you can build on it and refine your efforts.

Physically you can do all this, but mentally can you? Can you muster the enthusiasm for another run to the top of the mountain? Did you inadvertently make a deal with yourself that after the race you'll slow it down and enjoy it more? Did you make that deal with your self-conscious? Is your mind-body asking for payment now?

Can you maintain the early morning and late night sessions? Can you wheedle another set of 3-hour long runs out of your weekends? Do you think your family is ready to negotiate? More than likely they want you to return to "normal".

Or maybe you'll just give yourself totally over to a life of hedonistic dissipation. You'll become a cheeseburger-choking anti-runner. "I proved I could do it, now it's party time!" How long can you keep that up before your inner runner makes you feel lousy? How long can you avoid the bathroom scale and the mirror?

All these thoughts ricochet around in your brain as you lie about doing nothing. It's worse because you can't go for a long run and clear them away. You are trapped in the purgatory of a sedentary being. Those fetters that you broke and ran away from are back.

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax. One trip on your journey is complete. Take comfort in the completion. If you ran well or you ran poorly, either way, it is a cause to celebrate.

It's not another notch in the gun. It's not just another medal for the pile. It's a celebration of life. It's a celebration of being alive, of being mobile, of being blessed to drink from the runner's cup.

Every day running is a gift. Every race run is a gift. We need to be thankful for our gifts.

Rejoice. The comfort of the regimen is gone, but the joyfulness of life continues. It is morning and the world is served up to you again for breakfast on a new day.

Do what you want.

You want to take some time off? Do so without guilt in the glow of a job well done.

You want to throw yourself once more into the breach? Do so with joyous commitment.

You want to set your sites higher, to double down and shoot for a really challenging race? Go ahead, grab a hold with both hands and hoist yourself up that new mountain.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, the joy is in the chase and not the event. Life is a long run, enjoy it. Don't set yourself up. Regardless of the race run,

you're going to wake up the same person everyday. Whether it's a mile-and-a-half with the dog or 26.2 in qualifying time, it's special. Appreciate it. Enjoy it. You earned it.

In the marathon of life sometimes you have to stop looking at your watch and just focus on moving forward, one telephone pole at a time.

Boston Marathon Invocation

Introduction:

When the marathon season rolls around in Massachusetts we get a herd of English major media dusting off their classics anthologies to find something interesting to say. Not to be outdone, and wracked with nervous energy during my taper, I penned this piece.

I'm not an overly superstitious or religious man, but being that the big race is less than a week away...Prayer is my only remaining option.

(To be shared with participants on race day)

Some two thousand five hundred years ago the Athenians feasted their victory over Darius I and the Persians at Marathon.

During this celebration, our brother Phaedippas lay dead of exhaustion after carrying the news across the peninsula to Athens. He ran all the way.

Today we honor his feat by setting off on our own journey.

Like Phaedippas we have only our mortal strength, our legs and our hearts to bring to bear on the task.

Although we will be among a throng, we will be essentially alone in our task, beholden only to ourselves.

We have done our training and preparation and now it is time to take care of business.

The outcome is up to fate and the gods.

May we fly like the fleet winged Mercury down the slopes of Hopkinton and Ashland.

Give us the speed of the fleet footed Achilles (whose troublesome tendons I have inherited) as we power out of Newton Lower Falls over 128.

Lend us the strength of Hector as we grind up the hills.

Give us the power of Zeus when we lose hope at mile 23.

Bring us home from our wanderings like the wrath of Ulysses as we turn right onto Hereford and left onto Boylston Street.

Give us strength and courage.

For today we run like Gods!

Boston – 04 “Miserable”

Introduction:

The reality of the 2004 Boston Marathon was a hot, awful day for runners. The gods had no mercy. I wrote this piece within hours of completion and you can smell the heat in it. I got a torrent of feedback when I posted this piece from runners who said, “That’s exactly how I felt!”

Heat trumps training for New England runners.

It was a typical Patriots day in Boston. The Bruins got humiliated by the Canadiens in the playoffs, the Red Sox beat the Yankees when it didn’t really count, and the Boston Marathon kicked my butt again.

The marathon gods were angry on Monday. We knew it was going to be a long day when the weather forecasts started stabilizing on “unseasonably hot and sunny”. It turned out to be a beautiful day to watch a marathon. It was a miserable day to run a marathon.

Like it or not, that’s part of the mystique of Boston. You never know what the weather is going to bring. On paper it doesn’t look like a difficult course, but it always is. I can’t explain it rationally. Like being in an inexplicable, dysfunctional and abusive relationship, the more it kicks my butt, the more angry I get and more likely I am to come back and get my butt kicked again.

The silver lining, if any, is that most of us were able to psychologically put away our race time expectations by Saturday when it became clear what we were in for. This freed us from those stressful “I hope I do well” worries for the remainder of the weekend.

I had time to buy a white hat at the expo in preparation. I cut holes in the top in imitation of Dick Beardsley in the ’82 ‘duel in the sun’ with Alberto Salazar. Those of us who’ve run Boston before knew what we were in for.

Most of my experienced Boston running buddies switched to a “Go out slow and see how it turns out” attitude. The way it turned out is that we all survived, we were all uniformly miserable and we were slowed by 5-10% versus our expectations. There was no joy in Beantown on Monday. My salient comment afterwards was “How could I run so slow and still feel so awful?”

Standing in the 5th corral in Hopkinton surrounded by the crush of mid-packers it was already full sun and Mid-eighties. My thoughts turned to “OK, don’t look at the watch, just listen to your body and keep it slow”.

Usually there is a palpable energy in the corral. You can almost smell the adrenaline racing. Usually people can barely stand still as they chomp at the bit

to get going. Not this day. Runners sat on the ground trying to conserve energy and keep cool, like Bedouins lazing in the Saharan sun.

The palpable feeling was not quite 'dread', but definitely there was a taste of 'worry'. The guy sitting on the curb beside me had a large tattoo of the B.A.A unicorn logo on his shoulder. I could see it because everyone was in singlet and shorts. No tights or long sleeves here.

I was surprised to see the people still ran in costumes. They were either stupid or brave depending on how you look at it. It takes a lot of dedication to run 26 miles in that heat in a fuzzy bunny head or a full length Superman outfit

In a portent of the misery to come, a guy sidled up between me and the guy next to me and, mumbling something cheerful about using us a 'screen', began filling a Gatorade bottle with 'used Gatorade'. He surprised himself by overflowing the capacity of his container and dropped it, baptizing my shoes. I wasn't really upset because I knew that compared to what was coming this sprinkling was a minor annoyance.

Now, those of you from Atlanta, So-Cal or Australia may say; "Eighty degrees? What's the big deal? We train in that every day!"

The answer is apropos and talks to the inexplicable difficulties encountered in this race. Like those pesky hills in Newton, it's not the degree of difficulty itself; it's where they fall in the course. The heat on Monday, while not terribly hot in the grand scheme of things, was devastating because of where it fell.

Two weeks ago I was training with snow on the ground. We have only had short sleeves on once or twice. I donned a singlet for the first time this year on Monday morning. I risked terminal sunburn on my Pillsbury dough-boy body. (by the way, whatever that sunscreen sample they included in the race packet was, it worked great. It stayed on me through approximately five thousand gallons of sweat and water splashing)

We transitioned from winter to summer and skipped spring! I ran my last long training run in a forty-degree drizzle. That's a forty degree swing in two weeks. Bottom line; we were unprepared.

We were prepared for the distance. We were prepared for the hills. We were prepared for the intensity and the unique character of the race. We were given no chance to prepare for the heat.

And so it was, at high noon in Hopkinton, with the F-15 fly-over, we were off. Usually you can tell how the race is going to be at some point after 10-15k. In this one I knew it was going to be miserable from the start. Despite training well and feeling strong coming into the event, I never felt comfortable and never fell into a pace that worked.

There was none of the usual friendly banter for the first 10-15 miles while everyone sorts themselves out in preparation for the hard part of the race. All was heads-down silence and struggle.

I started at 20 seconds slower per mile than my race pace and held that for the first 10k. After that I backed off another 20 seconds per mile. Even with this substantial nod to negative splits, by the hills in Newton it was all over and I was crawling in. Only my conditioning kept me from a long death shuffle into the finish.

Everyone knew what to do and changed their race tactics to suit the day. We all forced fluids in the early miles. I had already gone through forty+ ounces of Gatorade and water by the six mile mark. I probably drank north of 200 ounces of fluids, and still lost 10 pounds. My teeth hurt all day Tuesday from the sugar.

I carry a bottle so I can avoid the early water stops because they are typically a melee with jacked up rookies trying to stop and grab-and-go veterans running up their backs.

Monday, for the first time, I hit every water stop, sometimes on both sides of the road. I poured 3-6 cups of water on my head, torso and legs each time trying to bring my core temperature within operating parameters. It was a losing battle. After 15k no one even pretended to run through the water stops. We all lingered at these oases, performing ablutionary rituals.

In the last 15k, to add insult to injury, the water and Gatorade had gotten warm and was sickeningly difficult to force. The combination of the crushing heat in overloading on fluids had everyone feeling nauseous and cramped for the majority of the race.

At the 10k mark I started wondering if I was going to finish. My usually positive inner monologue had been reduced to "Too hot, too hot, too hot..." keeping cadence with my stride.

On heartbreak I started smiling an idiot's smile. I had the following conversation with myself.

"I think I'm losing consciousness."

"Can you still do math?"

"I don't know. Let's try... hmm...five plus five is ten. Yup, still got the simple addition"

"How about the multiplication?"

"Hmm...fifty times fifty is two hundred and something...I think..."

“Well, let’s go a little bit further and see what happens”

Then I see the BC chapel on the right and I think with great celebration, “Hey, I’m going to finish this race.”

I am officially nominating the following people for sainthood:

- The homeowners along the course who stood for hours spraying us with garden hoses.
- The lady who gave me a handful of ice cubes that I put in my hat for a wonderful half-mile.
- The town or state workers who rigged up those fire hydrants to spray gallons of high-velocity ice-water into the course.
- Whichever God was responsible for the transporting tail wind in the last couple miles.

God bless you all. Each shower gave me hope for another quarter mile. In the final analysis that is what the marathon comes down to; making it through one more quarter mile.

By mile three my shoes were totally filled with water and my feet were sloshing around. I grimly made the executive choice of blisters over heat stroke. At the end my toes were wrinkled like pickled pigs feet.

The well meaning crowds were telling us how good we looked. The gallows humor on the course was “If we look good, I’d hate to see what looks bad”. On the back side of the hills I turned to the guy next to me and said, “I think it’s cooling down a little.” He replied matter-of-factly, “No, we’re just out of sweat”.

In the last three miles more than half of the runners were walkers. In that no-mans land around 23 miles where the finish seems unrealistically far away, they were dropping like flies. I changed my monologue to “One-Two, One-Two, One-Two” Keeping it simple for my over-cooked brain.

And then, the miracle happened again; I turned the corner onto Boylston Street and One-Two’ed through the finish. Got my hardware and decided whether or not it would be appropriate to throw up. What a miserable race.

I can only imagine how horrible it must have been for first-timers or for those who chose not to train well and ran anyway. I don’t know how many people dropped out, but it had to be a lot. For those who finished, you now have some to tell the grand kids about.

All the folks I talked to had the same basic experience. I met one nice lady from Tampa who came in third for the women masters with a 2:59 and, being from Florida, didn't seem to mind the sun too much. Great job Kim!

The natural question that comes to mind is "Why do you people keep coming back to Boston every year?" For me the answer is because it makes me angry and I'm too stubborn to let this race get away with kicking my butt. It may be an ugly, miserable race sometimes, but gosh darn-it, it's our miserable race and we love it.

So it looks like you'll be seeing me out on the roads this summer at the crack of dawn and down at the track in the evenings. Because now I have to qualify again, pay my hundred bucks and prepare for a good butt-kicking in April '05 at my favorite marathon.

Expert and timely Boston Marathon advice

Introduction:

As usual, in 2005, I had my pre-race jitters. Reading the comments of runners in the forums and seeing them at the expo made me think about all the good advice that overwhelms us. I thought it would be funny to give some anti-advice.

Warning: If you follow any of this advice, your chances of finishing the marathon will be greatly reduced.

When I'm out running and racing one of the questions that people frequently ask me, (besides "Do I know you?" and "Do you ever shut up?") is "Chris, since this is your 8th Boston Marathon, do you have any advice for us who are new to it?" As it turns out, I do indeed! As a matter of fact, I have first hand secrets that the so called 'experts' won't share with you!

Pacing:

There are three basic pacing strategies that you can employ at Boston. Negative Splits, Even Splits and "Go for it!"

Negative splits won't work at Boston. The first 17 miles are down hill. If you try to hold back, you'll have to fight the hills and you are guaranteed to burn out your quads. Only attempt this strategy if you have trained with down hill tempo runs. If you haven't, it's too late now.

That leaves 'steady pace' and 'go for it!' Take a moment to read the following two narratives and tell me which one will impress your friends more? Which one will you remember years from now when you're old and grey?

First Narrative: "I started slow, walked some water stops, and comfortably finished."

Second Narrative: "I took off like a rocket from the gun! I was 10 minutes faster than goal pace at the half! I don't remember much after Newton, but somehow I ended up wearing someone else's shirt. I started to bleed from my eyeballs at mile 24 but I gutted it out! I finished with a sprint, even though I lost a shoe somewhere, and, as I told the EMT's, 'This is a race I'll never forget!'"

Who do you want to be? Mr./Ms. Comfortable Casper Milquetoast? Or a hero with the courage of a tiger? Come on! Are you a mouse? Carpe diem! Go for it!

New duds make the race:

Here are some more useful tips that you won't get from the 'experts'. Buy a new pair of shoes for the race. They will be taking pictures and you don't want to have your crowning moment memorialized in those old shoes you've been training in, do you? While you're at it, make sure you buy something flashy and photogenic, like those hot-looking racing flats. Don't be seen in a pair of boring cushiony trainers. Don't worry, all that stuff about not wearing new shoes for the race is a myth concocted by the anti-shoe lobby.

But don't stop with sprucing up the old feet. Why not get a new outfit too? Don't waste your money on those expensive space-age fabrics. Get some good old cotton. If it's hot like last year, the cotton will retain all that cooling dampness and keep it close to your body where you need it. You'll conserve fluids and you won't have to stop at so many water stops. This will surely lead to a faster time. If you can't find cotton, wool is good too.

Super-Charge:

You can conveniently stock up on your new duds and other cool things at the race expo. While you're at the expo make sure you sample all the wonderful performance enhancing products on display there. What could be better than turbo charging your body the day before the big race? And it's all free! Eat it up! It's got to be safe, or it wouldn't be at the expo, would it? You haven't trained all these months to run an average race! Suck down all those tablets, goops and powders! Supercharge yourself for the race!

Chow down:

After the Expo, make sure you go to all the pasta parties and stuff down lots of noodles. 26 miles is long way to run and you're going to need all those carbohydrates. Make sure you stuff yourself to the gills. Heck, you might even consider bringing some home to re-heat for brunch on race day. It's a late start and you might need a few more pounds of pasta to top things off on Monday.

Internal heat:

Here's another great insider tip for you...Hot Peppers! If you read the label on your sports gels and creams you'll discover that the active ingredient is capsicum. This is the same muscle relaxing, wonder ingredient that is found in hot peppers. Make sure you eat lots of hot peppers the night before the race so your muscles will be greatly relaxed and ready to go on race day. Why waste time rubbing it on the outside when you can take it on the inside? This will greatly enhance your performance on race day.

Drown your pain:

While you're out stuffing in your pasta and peppers, make sure you drink plenty of alcohol. We here in Boston are quite proud of our traditions and are famous for our beer. Don't miss out. A little known fact is that the original course was designed to favor runners with hangovers. Get busy Saturday and Sunday nights. If you sober up before Newton, you haven't had enough.

Ancient ways are the best:

Do you ever experience chaffing? If so, then do what the ancient Greeks did to toughen up their skin. They invented the marathon, right? They would know about chaffing. There is nothing in the reports about Phidippides complaining about bloody nipples is there? Why, because they toughened up their skin by rubbing salt into it. You can benefit from this ancient healing method by rubbing plenty of salt vigorously into your pointy bits on race morning. The old ways are the best!

Summary:

I hope this has been a helpful and informative article for you newbies to Boston. Don't believe the stories about how we disdain outsiders. We're a warm and loving bunch up here in New England and look forward to having you on Patriots Day. We'll see you in Hopkinton and I'll call the EMT's for you on Heartbreak Hill.

A race runs through it

Introduction:

The Groton Road Race is my home town race. I'm directly involved in it as a participant and on the race committee. It has stayed with me for 14 years now like an old friend through the ups and downs. When you have a relationship with something that spans a decade and a half of your life it takes on a special meaning.

I wrote this piece for the race attempting to weave the GRR into a metaphor of my life. It was a struggle to write because it cut too close to the bone. There was no hiding of myself behind the scenes. I had my family help me with memories. It's a difficult exercise to travel your childhood and turn over stones in your garden that have long been neglected. Try as you might, you cannot stay indifferent of things like this and when they get too close it can be scary.

Take some time and go run through your roots (or routes), you might be surprised to find something new.

A race through Groton across 40 years.

This year is the 350th anniversary for Groton Massachusetts. I grew up in Groton in the 1970s and still live locally. I run with the local running club, the Squannacook River Runners, who produce the Groton Road Race annually. When we run through town each week someone invariably asks me, "Has Groton changed since you were a kid?" The answer is complex. There is much about Groton that has remained unchanged, but there are other things that are always in a state of transition.

Join me now for a metaphorical run through my own personal Groton Road Race. This will be my 14th year running this race—a race that has become part of the fabric of the town.

The Groton Road Race starts at the elementary school, where I started first grade in 1967. The school has grown over the years to meet the demands of new families and the final big bulge of the baby boom with various additions, both temporary and permanent.

The buildings that housed the high school were expanded in the mid 70s to include a new wing on the north side of the building, and the freestanding metal gymnasium was built in back. The junior high grades moved into this new space in 1975 and now have sole residency as the high schoolers now attend the new campus near the Groton-Dunstable town line.

The runners, more ahead of me than I'd like, will head out of the school driveway and turn left towards town. The Baptist Church across the street moved there in the late 70s from the old white church in front of the burial ground.

On the left at the end of Champney Street was a gas station where the high school kids would sneak off to buy candy, sodas and cigarettes during the day. These were the days before smoking became politically incorrect, and there was a smoking area at the high school where any student, but mostly the tough kids, could hang out and smoke.

Next, the racers will pass Sacred Heart Church on the right. This small church was originally a chapel at Groton School and was moved to its current location in 1904. It was here that I had first communion, confirmation, confession, went to catechism classes, got married and had my kids baptized.

As the runners approach the half-mile mark, they will be entering the town center. If you were to overlay the center of Groton today with the center of Groton from 40 years ago, or even 100 years ago, much would look the same. The old white clapboard buildings and great tree canopy would look similar to a turn-of-the-century post card. New generations bring new immigrants and the people have changed. This has been constant over the years.

The supermarket on the left has been there as long as I can remember, though at one time it was a Piggly Wiggly. The package store across the street was there 30 years ago too. Where the Italian restaurant is now, a Texaco station stood. My mother recently heard people still citing "Johnny's Texaco" as a meeting place. Further up on the right was Sargent's Drug Store. It was an old-time drug store from the 60s where you could get a milkshake with your medicine.

Continuing our cruise down Main Street, we'll pass the old town hall, police station and fire station. Thirty years ago there were only two police cars in town and for some reason they were numbered 11 and 12. If we were out causing trouble, we could drive by the police station to see if either car was out and thereby calculate our odds of getting caught.

On the left are the stone gates and the gate house for the Gibbet Hill 'castle'. The brick building here used to be the post office and Main Street had angle-in parking. On the right the Prescott School was at one time the junior high where I spent 7th grade. The current Moison's Ace Hardware replaced a smaller version of Moison's, Bruce's Pharmacy and a bank.

The Groton Inn, across Rte. 119 dates back to the 1600s. Luminaries who have stopped by include Ulysses S. Grant, Longfellow, Luther Burbank, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ward Beecher, Grover Cleveland, Alice and Eleanor Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Paul Revere. We used to be taken through the Groton Inn on field trips in elementary school. Soon, the race crests the hill by the old brown stone library on the right. Down behind the library are the town fields

where I spent agonizing little league days striking out and dropping pop flies. The fields are eerily similar to the way they were three decades ago.

All of this history transpires in the first mile of the race. As the racers look to check their pace at the one-mile mark they pass by Lawrence Academy, my alma mater. LA is one of two private schools in Groton which both lend a collegiate feel to the town.

After the one-mile mark the race turns off to the right down Old Ayer Road. We've run through the dense, historic center of Groton and are now heading past picturesque farmland. Stone walls border the lanes like they have for hundreds of years since some hardy colonial farmer pulled the rocks from the glacial soil and stacked them there to delineate his fields from the wilderness.

The first water stop comes up between the apple orchard and the farm that rock 'n roller J. Geils bought and has since sold. If you look hard at the field where Peabody Street and Old Ayer Road split, you'll see small hump that has a door like a hobbit hole. This is an apple cellar from the old farmstead.

The apple orchard is now disused, but when I was growing up, Jamaican pickers would come to bring in the crop. You would see them walking down to Johnson's Drive-In to buy cigarettes and chicken plate dinners. The house where I grew up, and my parents still live, is on Sky Fields Drive, just above Johnson's. From there we could cut through the trails to the orchard and gorge on fresh apples, sneaking out from the forest to climb trees, claim our prizes and catch poison ivy.

As the runners drink their water they will be kept company by a small brook that fronts the orchard and runs under Indian Hill Road at the two-mile mark of the race. When we were kids, in the spring, a type of fish called 'suckers' would run up the brook and we would chase them with sticks. Indian Hill Road turns into unpaved Nutting Road. As kids we used Nutting to access the miles of power lines and connecting trails on our dirt bikes.

One of those trails comes out by that small independent gas station that was in the Karate Kid Part IV movie. For a few weeks Pat Morita hung out with the townies at the Four Corner's bar each night during the shoot.

Winding down Old Ayer Road the race course turns right to Smith Street and crosses the new rail trail. We rode our bikes and ran there well before it was paved into the exercise freeway it is today.

There is one short steep hill that leads up Culver Road to Rte. 225. Just after, near the four-mile mark is the campus of Groton School where F.D.R., among others, matriculated. Runners are treated to the gothic revival masterpiece of St. John's Chapel rising like a spired castle.

The race course takes a short detour down Peabody Street. The flat area on the right is where an outdoor hockey rink once stood. I can remember playing hockey

there at 6:00 a.m. on cold February mornings. We would have to be shuttled inside the skate house between shifts to warm up. Past the second water stop, runners turn left onto Higley Street which turns into a tunnel of lilacs each Spring. Their blooms fill the air with thick perfume.

When the race pops back out on 225 at five miles racing gets serious. The small stone building at the corner of Long Hill is one of Groton's old one room schoolhouses. Farmer's Row is a beautiful panorama with majestic houses and barns. We accelerate up the Elm Street cutoff back into 119. This is where it becomes a final push back downhill and a hard right in to the school entrance.

As I put my head down and pump past six miles, memories will come flooding back. Recess in the dusty yard...the science teacher tossing chicken-egg-capsule experiments off the roof in 5th grade...hitting the window with my head in 3rd grade for four stitches... the bullies...a fat lip and a bloody nose...names and faces I haven't remembered since the previous year's race ...small town life flashing by at the finish.

Then, with a sprint around the track, gasping and wet, my race through the past will be over for another year. I'll get some water and allow the ghosts of the past to re-settle into the dust of my memory.

Both Groton and I have changed and grown, but my memories are timeless. Each year the Groton Road Race lets me relive my childhood and appreciate how lucky we are to have places like Groton.

14 years of the Groton Road Race

Introduction:

This is the second article I was requested to write for the Groton Road Race in 2005. It contains more about me and the history of the race.

It is comforting to have a race, your own race, about which you can share stories of longevity.

From the perspective of a runner who has run them all.

Hello, and welcome to the 14th annual Groton Road Race. My name is Chris Russell. I grew up in Groton. I have been asked to comment on the road race from the perspective of someone who has run all 13 previous 10K races. What do I remember over the years? What stands out? Has it changed?

I consider it a great privilege to have spent my formative years in such a beautiful place a Groton. No matter where I go and what I do I'll always be the product of small town New England. The Groton Road Race is part of the fabric of what makes Groton a great place to live and have a family. I'm also lucky enough to be the current President of the Squannacook River Runners. They are the small but hardy band of local runners and non-runners who make the event happen every year.

In 1991 when the first race was run, I hadn't yet heard of the Squannacook River Runners. Living in Littleton at the time and just returning to running after a decade hiatus I learned from my Mom that there was going to be a race. I ran cross country for the Lawrence Academy team in high school, but ran only fitfully through the whirlwind of college, getting a job, and starting a family. When I was finally settled down I found I had also settled out around the mid section. This first race gave me a goal to 'get in shape'.

I remember the race was run earlier in the year for the first couple outings and it was colder. I wore tights, a long sleeve shirt and a rolled up bandana for a sweat band. I wore a hand lettered shirt advertising my wife's new business. I was 29. I remember this because I was interviewed by the cable access T.V. people and they asked me if I was going to win! I told them that I might have a better chance the following year when I turned 30 into a new age category.

Those first couple races were still big races. There were over a thousand runners. The make up of the race was more serious runners. It wasn't until later years that the race turned into the family event that it is now. Why did I run every year? It became a rite of spring for me. It wasn't a bad thing or a compulsion. It was a good thing for me to go back to my roots in town and celebrate. I would

hook up with old friends from town and we would run. I knew all the people along the route. I spent my childhood riding bikes and walking here with friends. I recognized the faces and names of contemporaries in the race itself. This was without a doubt my home course.

As the years progressed I started running the Boston Marathon and this took my running to a new level, but I never missed a Groton Road Race. Even when the GRR fell only six days after Boston, (as it does this year), I ran it for fun. It was my anchor race.

Then in the spring of 1998 I needed some company on my long runs and I showed up to run with the Squanacook crew. I had the following conversation with Kevin Molloy; "You know I've run every Groton Road Race?"

"I've organized and been the race director for every Groton Road Race." He said, obviously not impressed.

Over the years I've had good races and bad races but I always show up for Groton and I always will as long as I can. My best year was when I was 39 in 2001. The GRR that year fell 2 weeks after Boston. This gave ample recovery time and I was able to post a swift (for me) 6:36 minute per mile pace. Conversely, my worst year was 2003 when I had a torn right Achilles' tendon and hadn't run for two months. I shuffled in for a 9:06 pace.

The first couple years I was really serious about it. I trained specifically for Groton. I had an issue with starting too fast, so I went to the course the day before and marked off the quarter miles with chalk on the road. That way I could make sure I was pacing correctly. I remember the joy of my young daughter leaning out of the crowd to 'high five' me as I churned through the last few yards towards the finish. As a matter of fact, the joyous early experiences I had a Groton inspired me to become a 'serious' runner and a marathoner. That whole experience has had a positive impact on my life. I never won anything, but one year the race committee gave me a pair of shoes for my perseverance.

What interesting things have happened at Groton over the years? Let me preface by saying that I probably missed most of them because I was out on the course, running, but here are a few that I'm privy to.

The weather, contrary to all the laws of New England weather, has been consistently forgiving. In the 13 years that I've run the race it has only rained once. That day was pretty miserable for the early races, the Tot's Trot, the 2K and the 5K, but by the start of the 10K it had cleared up and was merely damp. Actually it was great running weather. Over the years, the weather has been overcast and it has been sunny. Mostly it has been fine.

It has been windy some years. It hits you as you turn up the hill at the end of Smith Street onto Farmer's Row. I remember one year I got behind or 'drafted'

some swift young man pushing twins in a double stroller. Boy did he ever cut the wind!

On that same stretch of road we had a scare when two weeks before the race, new construction had torn up a whole length of Smith Street. At the last minute the developer laid fresh tar for the race. I remember the smell and stickiness of it in the sun that year.

One year at the start we had some entertainment. One of the elite runners was caught short and decided to pee in the bushes across the street from the school. As Kevin Molloy was getting ready to send the runners, a woman strode purposely towards him, seized the microphone and proceeded to lecture all the runners about propriety, indecency and property rights. The dumbfounded look on Kevin's face was memorable. Apologies to all who were involved, but from where I was standing it was pretty funny.

One year there was a police emergency and the cruisers cut through the race pack right in front of me. Another time, as I was running down Old Ayer Road close to the 2 mile mark young girl, maybe 9 years old, ran by me. Apparently she was a young phenomenon for a couple years, but she blew right by us!

The race has become a Groton tradition with a large portion of the participants coming from the town itself. The 10K has a broader reach, probably because it was the original event and is known regionally as a quality 10K. The 5K has a large content of local participants. Groton has become a family tradition for many local families. The whole family shows up and participates in different events. The data seem to support this. Last year 22% of the 10K participants were from Groton and about 40% if you include the adjacent towns. 36% of the 5K runners were from town and around 70% of the 5K runners were from the contiguous towns.

The Groton Road Race is a tradition for me now. It is an anchor race across all the other life changes. It's a great race with a beautiful course that is well supported and well run for racers and family alike. Contrary to literary opinion, you can go home again, I do it every year. This year will be my 14th Groton road Race on April 24th. I'll see you there. I have a streak going that I have to uphold.

Section III

It stinks to get old and other injury whining...

No excuses and no limits

Introduction:

To start off this section I have put in an inspirational speech that I gave to my Toastmasters club. I contacted Denny and talked to him about his challenges and how he rose to meet them. People like Denny put things in perspective for those of us who have the physical capability and want only the inspiration.

The Denny Chipollini Story

“No excuses and no limits!”

Those are the words of Denny Chipollini. He’s an amazing guy that I’ve gotten to know, and I’m going to share his story of inspiration with you. His lessons are applicable to all of us.

Denny was an average guy, like you and I, until he experienced a series of life-altering events. It started with a serious car accident in 1991. Both Denny’s legs were severed. The doctors re-attached both legs. Unfortunately the re-attached left leg was too traumatized and had to be amputated.

Two months after the accident, while Denny was undergoing one of 15 operations to save his legs his wife was also in the hospital giving birth to his son Nicholas.

The doctors told Denny he would never walk again. Not discouraged, Denny used his new son Nicholas as motivation and began his own painful and determined rehabilitation.

With a lot of sweat, pain and visualization Denny ran his first 5k race 4 years after the accident with the help of a prosthetic leg.

As inspirational a story as this is, of one man’s will and determination to overcome adversity in his life, the story doesn’t end there.

Denny’s personal success was soon overshadowed by his son Nicholas being diagnosed with Neurofibromatosis, (NF), a disease that causes tumors to grow on the nerve endings, lesions and a variety of learning disabilities and emotional problems.

As we all would do at these times of sorrow, Denny did some soul searching. Put yourself in his place. Think about how he must have felt.

Denny decided that he had been given a series of gifts. Denny decided that he was uniquely suited to spread a personal message of overcoming adversity and

how we can use our different gifts to lead full lives. He decided to target his message especially to children.

Denny began to run marathons and use his story, and the notoriety that it brought, as a vehicle to help raise awareness and funds for childhood diseases. He educates people to bring understanding and acceptance.

He was an Olympic torchbearer, and has run the Philadelphia, San Diego and NYC marathons. He's had TV appearances and multiple honors bestowed on him for his efforts.

Finally, Denny has created his own foundation, Generation Hope, an organization that helps kids with disabilities. Denny gives presentations in schools to spread his message to kids.

You can tell this is what really gets him going! How do I know? I talked to him this week. I was introduced to Denny through this article in the June 2003 Runners World Magazine. I was so taken by it that I picked up the phone and called him. I talked to Denny yesterday morning to tell him how impressed I was with his story.

Denny is very positive and emotional when he talks about the work he does with kids. You can feel the energy. You can feel the tingles that he gets when he sees a kid's light bulb go off.

He's particularly effective because he's been on both sides of the fence, growing up a kid with no disabilities. He is uniquely qualified to speak to the hearts of all kids.

He told me a story of how he recently spoke at a Baltimore school and how he changed one kid's life for the better. When he went back to the school to follow up, one boy said; "The other kids pick on me, but after listening to you I found out it's ok to be different. They still pick on me, but they don't bother me anymore". This boy's whole attitude had changed and he had gone from getting C's and D's to getting A's and B's.

That is Denny Chipollini's gift.

He also told me, that as a result of the Runner's world article, a man from Maine had called and offered the use of his summer camp for free.

That is Denny Chipollini's impact.

As Denny says, "It's all under your control, the mind is a powerful thing, you've got to make the decision to use it, no excuses - no limits".

Green on Green

Introduction:

In June of 2004 I left my house in my pickup truck headed for the airport. I had just squeezed in a lunch run in the woods behind my house with the dog, showered up, grabbed a container of cottage cheese and jumped in the truck to go.

It being June in New England, some mosquitoes got in with me. About 2 tenths of a mile from leaving my driveway I was swatting at one of these when I left the road and tagged a telephone pole head on. Any other spot on the road I could have swerved and recovered, but not this day.

After dealing with the police, ambulance and tow truck, I got another car and headed back to the airport. When the adrenaline wore off I was hurting in a bunch of places, most notably my right knee that had impacted the dash board. I didn't think much of it at the time, but it would take a year to get back to where I was running-wise.

In these stories you can see the interesting denial-anger-depression-acceptance-healing cycle I went through.

Contemplating injuries in the North East Kingdom.

The sun warms like a heat lamp on my neck and shoulders, silhouetting my frame in shadow across the picnic table. A dry breeze comes and goes, like the trucks passing in the highway behind me, turning the maple leaves over and exposing their silvery bottoms.

The panorama that unfolds before me is a slice of what is known as the 'North East Kingdom'. It looks as quasi-spiritual and Tolkien-esque as it sounds. Deep green on green. So alive with trees that the whole view seems like some giant sleeping green animal stretched out to the horizon. You can almost see the land breathing.

The broad shoulders of the Green Mountains amble away into the distance towards New Hampshire. Farms form rectangle strips of lighter green like Band-Aids on the hills. White houses speckle the landscape here and there like squared lifeboats in a frozen green seascape.

There is only the sound of bird song and the wind ruffled leaves.

Vermont is a beautiful place in the early summer. It is amazing how a place so bleak in February can be so alive in June.

Down there among the trees are wondrous, hidden jewels of places to run, but I'll not pluck those jewels today. I won't run today. I won't run tomorrow. My knee is far too tender to take my weight. Maybe on Thursday I'll give it a test. With any luck I can slowly start up again by the end of the week, but I've learned the hard way, more than once, that it is better not to rush these things. Injuries demand respect if not fealty.

If you're a mid-packer with any experience you know how these things usually happen. You get too cocky, you try to do too much too fast and your body says "Sorry dude, time to take some time off". The body does not negotiate or listen to reason.

This time it was not the normal, expected fit of runners' hubris that cut me down. It wasn't a contemptuous lack of stretching. It wasn't a taking-for-granted skip of the warm up for old tendons. It wasn't too much too fast. Although, knowing myself, it could have been any of those things.

This time, ironically enough, it was a mosquito that stopped me in my tracks.

A mosquito – a distracted swat – a momentary lapse of attention – a telephone pole all-of-a-sudden, unavoidably right there in front of my truck – an air bag exploding – blood gushing from my nose – and when the adrenaline had drained, an ache in my knee from slamming the dashboard at 25 mph.

The random nature of this injury does not exempt me from the predetermined injury cycle. The cycle is well known to those of you who have lived it. Injuries are as much psychological as physical.

First there is the 'denial' phase, where you try to pretend you're not really hurt. You'll miss a couple days of training but you won't have to compromise your goals or let go of that race you have scheduled, right?

Then there is the anger. "Why did this have to happen to me now?!"

Then there is the sense of loss and grieving. (This may be punctuated by depression and over eating!)

Finally there is acceptance and, if everything works out, rebirth.

Ironically even those of us who have surfed this cycle many times are fated to go through it each time again, like Prometheus and his tortures.

The sun at 4:00 PM on my shoulders is not even close to setting. In the North East Kingdom Helios has another five or six hours to ride this time of year, and he gets up early too.

A thin haze rises from the valleys, softening the view. The smell of dairy farms is everywhere for a hundred miles in every direction. It is a sweet/sour smell that makes me think more of the fecundity of this land than of cows.

Down among the sultry foliage I can see, in my mind's eye, beautiful dirt roads waiting to be run. There are canopied lanes with dappled sunlight playing shadows on ancient trunks as I pass by, breathing deep and smiling. Hidden there, I know, are turn-of-the-century covered bridges that will echo my footfalls with a hollow 'thunk-thunk' over clear, cold rivers.

There will be no run today. For today I'm in the final phase of my injury; acceptance and anticipation.

Two weeks ago before the telephone pole so rudely leapt in front of me, I was on the track spinning out fast long workouts. Pushing hard twice a week, I was feeling strong and fast, (for me).

I've seen the pattern before. If it wasn't the telephone pole it would have soon been a protesting tendon, crying 'uncle' from the abuse. I was probably already on that track of hubris that leads only to one place, to the inevitable wake up call of the injury.

Injuries aren't necessarily bad. They reveal your weakness and limits. They tell you when it's time to slow down.

Like so many of you mid-pack career runners, I'm an old pro at being injured. I'm getting better at it. I only tried to run through this one once before I settled in to the inevitable time off.

That's denial for you. Denial makes it seem more logical to hop on one leg for five miles than to take a couple days off. In the process you take a one week injury and tweak it into a three week injury by running on it. Why are we so stupid and pig headed? What would make me think I could run on a knee that had a weak spot like a gear missing some teeth and somehow, miraculously, it would just be ok?

As I sit and contemplate this beautiful Vermont pastoral afternoon, I think I know why we do it. We have to try because we are overwhelmed by fear of the loss. How far a mental journey is it to that dark corner of your mind where some small voice asks; "What if this is it? What if I'll never run again?" That's scarier than all the stories Stephen King wrote over on the other side of those mountains.

For me, sitting here, I feel the tangible loss of those peaceful lanes I imagine hidden, meandering amongst the old growth below. I have remorse for them today.

Even the short term loss of habit is hard. You miss that daily work out. I'm sure there is a physiological impact of missing those happy running chemicals that

usually bathe your cerebrum. You miss it all, like the loss of a close friend and you grieve.

Then there is a flicker of light from those dark corners of misery. A recollection of injuries past that laid you low for months and years but always resulted in rebirth. Each time progressing from the slow early totterings you emerged phoenix-like from the ashes of your injured body with a greater appreciation of what is really important.

Maybe not the first month, maybe not the second, but at some point you'll be raising your hands in joyous triumph at the wonders that your legs and lungs can perform once again.

Think of people with real challenges, like Denny Chipolini who lost his leg and fought his way back. He is now one of the happiest runners around and using his experience to inspire others. That puts a banged up knee in perspective.

Whatever your injury, you can use it for a recalibration of your soul. Use it to figure out just what is important to you in all this? We mid-packers may never get the trophies, but the act of running rewards us everyday, and we should savor that.

My advice is to savor these gifts every day, and when you do get injured, whether through hubris or happenstance, ride out the waves and focus on the inevitable rebirth that is your unique opportunity as a runner.

Maybe next week I'll stop by here and run blissfully along those hidden lanes. If not next week, then maybe the week after, or maybe next month...que sara sara.

Kneed to run

Introduction:

The injury dance continues. What I hoped would be a couple weeks off turned into full year rehabilitation.

Mortality isn't for wimps...

Here I sit, X-rays in hand, waiting for the orthopedic surgeon to see me. I haven't run in two weeks, (actually 11 days, 2 hours and 33 minutes, but who's counting?)

It's frustrating. Sitting and waiting. I can feel the 5-10 extra pounds growing around my waist from the inactivity. I don't know about you, but for me not running, not doing something you love, brings on a diabolic combination of indolence, boredom and a creeping depression.

Here I am, again, at the doctor's office.

After a few decades of running, I've got the doctor thing figured out. I can cut right to the chase and skip the first five steps of the running injury 'doctor dance'. I was not always as savvy, and wasted many good months of running time patiently being a patient.

The way it used to work for me was as follows:

Step 1: Call your primary care physician or general practitioner and say, for example, 'my heel hurts'.

Step 2: Visit to the GP's office for a nice read of some old National Geographics and a check up where you were told a) stop running if it hurts and b) take these pain killers.

Which, of course, is nearly useless, (except for the National Geographic, which is a great magazine), because, a) you're not going to stop running and b) you're probably already an ibuprofen addict. Therefore you progress to:

Step 3: It still hurts so you get referred to a 'specialist', for example; a podiatrist for your heel problem.

Step 4: You go see the 'specialist' who is used to treating the over-70 crowd, (read a few more pages of that great article on the discovery of Ramses II's tomb), and although the specialist is more specific in telling you what's wrong, (i.e. "you've got an inflamed Achilles' tendon"), you're inevitably banished to more painkillers and a dozen sessions with the physical therapist.

Now you're on to...

Step 5: a few visits with the therapist, which can be quite helpful, depending on if you hook up with a good therapist. At best they teach you all about your stretching shortcomings and you learn to heal yourself. At worst, it's 45 minutes with some rubber bands and therapy balls, like something on a Sunday Morning infomercial.

The therapy may help, but by this time it's been a couple of months so your heel might have gotten better on its own...or you're on to the glorious crescendo of:

Step 6: You check with your running pals and find a good sports doctor.

I skip right to step 6 now.

Don't waste your time and money on the preliminary doctor dance. (Don't worry; you can use the money you save to subscribe to National Geographic) Find someone who treats athletes. They are the only people who are going to empathize with you and will have seen your injury before. Best of all, when they tell you to stop running, you can be sure it's necessary and not a placebo whim.

Go to the doctors who work on the pros. It makes a huge difference in the quality of care and your piece of mind.

So I sit. I can feel the conditioning, so hard fought for, daily seeping away. I know from experience it leaves twice as fast as it comes back. It's like watching a train you have missed recede into the distance and you're left standing on the platform holding a heavy bag, not able to do anything about it.

And there is fear. What are the scenarios to be played out here today? The doctor could say, "It's just a bruise; take it easy for a couple weeks." Then we do some stretching, some wiggly strange exercises, and the miles build back slowly on soft surfaces. This scenario, let's call it 'Scenario A', isn't a bad one. I know how it works and at least it gives me something to do.

'Scenario B' might involve a cast of some sort and some therapy that would knock me out for a couple months. Maybe even some minor surgery (yikes!); still, it contains an end point. It's ok.

The fear comes from 'Scenario C'. In this scenario the doctor looks very unhappy and says something like "fractured patella". This would be followed by some comforting advice to find another sport that doesn't involve use of the right leg or "risk dire consequences". That's the dark scenario. That's the morbid fiend that threatens to steal my soul.

Mortality stinks. A couple months ago I was in 'marathon shape'. Now I'm pin wheeling into a couch potato with overwhelming entropy.

In the end these results were indeterminate. The doctor said things like, “no sign of bone damage” and “no arthritis” and “good joint separation”.

Most importantly, he answered the only real question that I had; the \$64,000 question; “Can I run?” He said “Sure, just take it easy”.

There is still something messed up in the knee. He sent me for an MRI ‘to see if there is any soft tissue damage’. It hurts to run.

The MRI machine whirs and clicks away secret pictures of my soft tissue as I shiver in my back-less Johnny on the slab. A nice nurse/technician apologizes and promises ‘almost over’. I don’t mind, I don’t often get to take naps during working hours.

I pick up the slides after they are developed. The doctor is on vacation and it will be another week before he will have a time to see me and look at them.

Curious, my wife and I pull the slides out and hold them up to a light. It all looks like a smudge to me. I can’t tell what it is I’m looking at. (“Look dear, there’s its little head...”)

One interesting thing is that certain images are circled with a red pen and little red exclamation points are next to the circles. That can’t be good news, can it? I’m sure the technician wasn’t just highlighting my excellent bone structure. We’ll have to wait and see what the Doc says.

I tried Chi-running to see if I could exercise mind over matter, but as I was attempting to keep my head in the proper position, I stepped in a gopher hole. I rolled my ankle, tried instinctively to catch myself with the bad knee and ended up laying on my back with my entire Chi running into the ground.

Once again I’m convinced that God has a strange sense of humor.

If you’re a mid-packer with any history, you’ve been to the doctor with an injury, or will eventually. Take my advice, don’t waste your time, and find a good one.

As runners we tend to be our own doctors. No other person will ever know more about your body than you do, but don’t be afraid to ask for help. Eventually you will get back on your feet. We all get slower and more brittle with age. Mortality stinks, but it’s better to run from it than to sit and wait.

Therapy Dialog

Introduction:

This piece isn't really about anything in particular. I was just using my time in the waiting room to practice writing dialog! I've had good and not-so-good physical therapists. What it boils down to is that the therapist can only point out the path; you are the one who has to follow it.

Getting help – getting better

“Hi, I'm Chris Russell, I have an 8:00 Appointment with one of your Physical Therapists?”

“Yes...Mr. Russell...Is this your first time here?”

“Well, yes and no. I've been to physical therapy before, and I've been to this hospital before, but I don't think I've been to this physical therapy before...”

She looks up from her paper pile and examines me. I smile.

“Do you have your doctor's paperwork?”

“Yes, here's the scrip.” I hand her a form with some cuneiform inscriptions.

“What is your insurance? Who is your primary care physician?”

Blue Cross Blue Shield. It's a PPO and I don't need a primary care, but it's from a car crash and will probably be covered by my car insurance.”

“O.K. Read this one, fill these out.” She hands me a stack of paper on a clipboard. The clipboard is neon-blue. It is evidently a gift from some zealous young pharmaceutical rep.

“I'm going to hang my suit over here, OK?”

“That's fine, but there are lockers in the men's room if you want.”

“Nah, it's ok, nobody is going to steal my clothes.”

I had worn shorts to facilitate the therapy, but carried a suit and tie in dry cleaning wrapped blue-plastic. I had to meet some clients afterward and wouldn't have time to go home and change.

I slouched in a waiting room chair and began filling out. No, I'm not allergic. No, I don't have heart problems. No, I'm not on drugs...

I think I should just mock up those forms on the laptop with a picture of my insurance card scanned in. Then I could just print it out and hand it to them, or better yet give them a CD, or beam it through the wireless every time I see the doctor.

I dutifully turn in the forms and curse myself for forgetting to bring one of the 4 books I'm reading, especially that old Steinbeck novel from before he was famous. Quite a communist rabble rouser he was in his youth!

I sift through the stack of old magazines and settle on a copy of "Outdoor Life". It should have a couple exclamation points in the title. Its pages are filled with young, skinny bohemians mountain biking off cliffs and shooting through churning rapids in kayaks.

"Mr. Russell?" A cheery voice. "Hello, I'm Lauren, I'll be working with you. Come on in." She leads the way back and has me hop up on one of those padded bed/table things. It has a piece of white paper on it, like butcher's paper that crinkles and slips under my weight.

"So, what's the problem Christopher?"

"Well, I've got a cracked patella, right here." I touch the knee. "And the patella tendon is smashed up, here." Tracing a line down from the knee cap with my finger.

"And you've seen the doctor?"

"Yup, the orthopedic surgeon."

"From Where?"

"ProSports Orthopedic, in Waltham, I'm a runner and I try to go straight to a sports doctor." I say. "I got X-rays at Mass. General, but they didn't show much, so he sent me for MRI, that showed the crack and the tendon."

"On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?"

"I don't know. It doesn't hurt too much right now..."

"So a two?"

"No, More like a five."

"Are you running now?"

"No, the doctor told me to take some time off. I did run on it for a couple months before I realized it was broken." I say. Then I add for clarification, "So I'm off for six weeks. That screws up my fall race plans."

"What are you looking for out of therapy?"

"I want to run."

She puts her hand on one of my feet dangling off the table and grips it.

"Ok, push against my hand."

I extend the knee.

"Does that hurt?"

"No"

She switches feet and tries it again.

"How about now?"

"No"

"Ok, Lay on your back" She says picking up what looks like a big protractor from the bedside table.

"Let's see what your range is."

"My quads are good, but my hams and hip flexors are tight."

"Not too bad, are you doing any stretching?"

"Just basic achilles and hamstrings, plus core strengthening exercises once a day." I show her examples of my routine.

"Do you do your quads?"

"No, I've never had any problems with them. My hip flexors are tight, but my quads have always been loose."

"You should add in some simple quad stretches to try to lengthen that patella tendon and take some of the stress off of it."

"OK, I can do that. What's next?"

"We'll put some Ionto through the tendon." She walks away and returns with a little plastic razor.

"We're going to have to shave some hair off the knee to get the electrode to stick"

“Yeah, I can do that. Can I get a little soap and water or something?” I say, looking incredulously at the little white razor.

“I’ll see what I can do.” She leaves again to rummage for a paper cup.

Some other patients have arrived by now and are happily pulling on weights and other apparatus. It seems to be a lark for them, to be here chatting up the staff with their sore shoulders and bad backs.

Lauren returns with a mixture of hand soap and water in a tiny Dixie cup.

“Thanks, that’ll do the trick.” I say and I take it from her. I judiciously scrape away at my pink knee, quickly overwhelming and clogging the little razor. “That’s nothing, you should see my back.” I think to myself, but wisely choose not to share out loud with Lauren, who has meandered off in search of the lonto device.

I manage to provide a little clearing for her and she swabs it down with Alcohol.

She attaches the medicine soaked electrode patch to the knee and affixes the sister patch high on my thigh, (no shave required).

She turns on the juice and it stings.

“It stings a little.” I say.

“Yes, It will until it establishes a channel, then it won’t sting as much.”

“I can deal with it, it’s ok”

I lay back and look at the kayakers and mountain climbers some more.

“Ding!” 11 minutes later my timer goes off, and like a Butterball in the oven, I’m done.

“Ok, you’re done.”

“Yup.”

Lauren unhooks me and leads me back out to reception.

“Ok, We are going to have to see you twice a week for the treatment.”

“Twice a week?” I look at her like she’s insane. “I travel a lot.” I say in way of explanation. “ My wife and kids don’t even see me twice a week.” I conclude with a lame smile.

“We’ll need to at least get through the lonto treatments.”

“All right, I’ll try.”

I schedule another appointment. I retire to the men’s room with my clothes to suit up. I’ve got a meeting in Connecticut. It will be three hours windshield time both ways. Yikes.

“Bye.” I wave to the receptionist.

“Have a great week.”

“You too. Hasta Luego”

These boots are made for walking...

Introduction:

As I became more and more resigned to being injured, I began to work with it. (This would be the acceptance phase) I tried different activities to see what would give me a buzz and not tweak the knee. In this story I went for a nice crack-of-dawn walk around the beautiful city of Montreal. Apologies to Nancy Sinatra!

Walking works; in a pinch.

I've re-engineered myself into a 'walker'. My knee is still bugged from a car crash in the summer. I'll probably have to have it operated on. There are some nasty-achy bits that need to come out.

It hurts too much to run. I can't stand not running, but I have been through the denial – anger – sadness loop and am firmly seated in acceptance. I can't run right now.

Being the type of person I am I can't leave it at that. I can't sit still. I'll get the operation and I will run again, eventually. But, I have to find something to do, something to fill the gap.

The good news is that I can still walk. I've always rolled my eyes at those 'wimps' who tell me how walking is as much exercise, even a higher quality exercise, than running. It just seems sooo sloooow.

Left with no choice, however, I have embraced a 40-60 minute vigorous walk each day. It turns out to be reasonably fulfilling in its own way.

Walking has some good tactical advantages. First, you don't need to stretch or warm up; you just open the door and go. Second, you don't need any special clothing; you can walk in jeans. Third, it is not the least bit intimidating. It's hard to get intimidated by the thought of walking. There's a big difference between staring down a 10k tempo run and a 45 minute trail walk. Walking just isn't scary.

I have always been a lunch and night time runner. It just hurts way too much to run in the early morning. I hate it. I can force myself to do it, but I don't enjoy it. I feel like the Tin Man before he got the oil. Give me a late night run when my body is awake and my metabolism is working. You can keep those sunrise specials. But, walking? No problem!

This is great! Now I'm popping out of bed at 5:00 AM every morning. I throw on my jeans, step into some shoes, wake up the dog and we're off for our morning jaunt. I can see why people like this time of day (now that I don't have to view it

through a haze of discomfort). It's really beautiful in the early hours before everyone is up and about.

We start by circling my neighborhood. It's about 1k around a dead end cul-de-sac. It's an interesting world at 5:00 AM. There is less light pollution in the sky and you can see all the stars. The air is cold in November. It is quite dark out. Once your eyes adjust you can see fine by the star light and moon light.

I now know which few neighbors are early risers. The glow of the sun doesn't start to break the eastern horizon until about 5:30. It is just me and Buddy, sniffing the air and the bushes, respectively.

For the second half of our adventure we head into the woods. It is hard to see details in the dark but the trails glow with the starlight and you can find your way. Shouldn't we be afraid of tromping around in the woods in the dark? Buddy and I aren't. I do carry a hand carved Elm walking stick (it's hard to find Elm in New England). Buddy tries to steal it from me. We make plenty of noise wading through the crunchy leaf litter. Anything that doesn't want to meet us gets plenty of warning and head start.

I let Buddy run free. He's so strong now that he's almost 1 year old. He'll take off in forays against some unseen threat or prey. I'll give a whistle and he'll come galloping back to say 'Hi'. The worst thing we have in our wood is probably Coyote and they don't want to have anything to do with us.

One funny thing is that it took the dog 2 days to get used to the new routine. Now he's up at 4:49 yipping in anticipation. This bugs my wife who now has to deal with an early-bird border collie when I'm on the road traveling.

One such morning found me in Montreal last week. Walking is a good 'on-the-road' exercise too. No special requirement, just head out the hotel door and walk. There are plenty of people up and about in Montreal at 5:00 AM. Lots of activity. St. Catherine Street was lit and bundled up people bustled to work. It was in the 'teens' for temperature and there was the glare of ice on the roads.

I discovered another good thing about walking. When you are walking you can pull over and get a hot cup of coffee at Tim Horton's. You can carry it along. Since you are wearing your jeans, you have your wallet with you and you can pay for a coffee and croissant! How cool is that.

Really, though, it's not the same as high as getting in a good run. It's not as clarifying as sweating out a hilly 10k, but walking has its advantages. This biggest advantage is starting my day early and getting some exercise in before the press of life starts beating on you.

In conclusion, not being able to run is not the end of the world. It stinks, but, hey, that's life. Que sara sara. Walking, while not the fantastic workout that running is, has some good points.

As long as you're above ground, you're doing well. If you can figure out a way to keep moving forward at the same time, that's a win.

Walk on...

Section IV

On the Road Again

Le Frosty Runs

Introduction:

One of the great things about running is its portability. I have been traveling my whole career. I have run in Tokyo, India, Australia, Mexico, China and all across the US and Canada. I have found that one of the best ways to explore a new city is to go out and get lost in it with your running shoes. Sure this leads to some challenging situations, but it also leads to some great epiphanies.

I've spent a lot of time in French Canada over the last few years and this article was the first written in this compilation. The stark absurdity of doing speed work in a dark, sub-zero, ice covered parking lot led me to start writing my running experiences in a journal.

Quebec City, Canada 12/09/03

Down on the bike path, by the canal, the ice is two inches thick and slick. It is lumpy and uneven from fossilized footprints. Any attempt to plant your foot will inevitably end in your planting your butt in the snow bank or the river. This makes speed work on my normal training route fairly perilous.

The temperature was hovering around 3 degrees when I left the apartment this morning. It was brisk, but there was no wind and it was not uncomfortable. It was dark and the city was soundless and lifeless at 5:30 AM. The mercury would eventually climb close to double digits as the sun crested the Chateau Frontenac around 6:20 AM, on my way back. Quebec city is on the far eastern side of the time zone so that even in the dead of winter the sun comes up relatively early.

My marathon-training plan called for 6 fast 800's as a work out. My biggest challenge was finding a patch of bare tar or cement long enough to fit the bill. It's 'challenging' to come careening into the end of an interval and hit an ice patch in the dark. I managed to find a relatively quiet industrial park with a good 600 meters plus of snow and ice-free surface, and proceeded to work out. I was like stampeding muskoxen on the tundra, blowing great clouds of breath into the chilly atmosphere, clumping down the road.

Now, I'm a New Englander, so I'm use to the cold. 5 degrees is not too bad, as long as you're dressed for it and you keep moving. Once you break a sweat, you don't want to stop and walk. If you had to stop and walk for some reason, you'd freeze.

Synthetic clothing is a must. You have to move the wet away from your skin expeditiously to retain heat. My kit is simple. I have basic winter tights, a basic long sleeve tee shirt and a fleece sweater. When it's windy or below 10 degrees I layer on an additional tee shirt. This morning it wasn't uncomfortable or surprising, but it was still pretty cold.

The most important accessory to have when the temperature drops into single digits is the balaclava. A fleece balaclava will keep your whole body warm by keeping your head warm. Almost as importantly, "balaclava" is really fun to say. I have a black one. I look like I'm running from a bank heist when I wear it. If you don't own a balaclava, get one. It is like tights for the head. Sure, you look goofy, but you're toasty warm.

When it's that cold out, the moisture that is wicked away from your skin by the synthetics flash freezes upon contact with the air. It's not uncommon to see the balaclava clad runner with intricate castles of crystalline ice riding on their shoulders. One can return from a cold run quite fetchingly adorned in natural frosting.

I have a beard and a moustache in the winter months. It keeps the remaining patch of your face, (left exposed by the balaclava), protected from the elements. But your facial hair also grows icicles. Like beads in a Rastafarian's dreadlocks, the ice decorates your beard. You can come back from a run looking like a picture of an Antarctic explorer. One time returning from a run, when I was wearing headphones, I looked in the mirror to discover that I had a 6-inch icicle dangling from my left ear like a chandelier. This morning wasn't so bad. The only interesting cold side effect I noticed was that my eyelids were sticking together from the ice.

I got my workout done, and it put a positive glow to my whole day. Let's face it, what in the business world could possibly be as challenging as speed work on the tundra in the wee hours of the morning?

My advice is this; don't be afraid of the cold. Dress for it. Respect it. But don't use it as a lame excuse to stay snuggled between the sheets when you should be out training. There is nothing better to earn confidence and self-respect in the spring racing season. You know you've paid your dues.

When, in warmer times, you need assurance, you can always think about that time you could have stayed in bed. No one was there to push you out, but yourself. You did it. You got up before the sun in a strange city in a foreign place and ran your scheduled workout in the sub zero weather, in the ice and snow.

That, my friends, is yours and yours alone. No one can take that from you. That is one more little badge of courage that makes you a better person. That is one more day that running has been a little bit of your salvation.

Guilt Trips

Introduction:

This article, although written in the third person, accurately describes my daily fight with inertia!

Traveling while training is exhausting work.

It's completely dark. Someone is talking in a boisterous Southern twang about some baseball team with clock radio fidelity. Painfully loud and static filled. He rolls over and swats mindlessly at the source of the noise.

Futilely smacking a channel changer and box of Kleenex to the floor, he finally pries open one eye, seeking the digital glow of the early morning daemon. Although he's raining blows on it indiscriminately, now the radio won't stop and actually gets louder and more static. Finally he gropes for the cord and pulls it from the wall, silencing the hell-spawn at its source.

"Oh, God. Where am I?" he thinks. "What time is it? What day is it?" The pieces fall into place one by one, coalescing from the fog of a latent headache. "It's Tuesday, I'm in a hotel in Atlanta, it's 4:30 AM, and I have to get up and get a work out." he repeats to himself as if programmed. "I have to. Really. I have to. Oh God."

His eyes are burning. He got 4 hours of sleep. His tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth and it tastes like he spent the night eating dryer lint. He feels like someone beat him with a stick all night. And even though he has maintained his sobriety, his current state closely mimics a five martini hangover.

It all comes back. There were rain delays coming in. They lost his reservations. He had to wait for a room. A 2 hour flight turned into an 8 hour travel nightmare. Just another day at the office for a traveling man.

He has to get up and go work out. He has to. If he doesn't the day is a loss. As much as he wants to believe that there is some kinder part of the day available, he knows how these management meetings go. They will have an agenda that starts at 8:30 and goes to 6:00 with dinner at 7:00. The whole thing will be out the window and off the rails by 9:00 AM and he won't be back in this dysfunctional bed until midnight. If he doesn't work out now, he won't work out today. If he doesn't work out today he'll hate himself all day.

He swings the dead legs and feet out onto the floor with Tin Man rusty creaks. He sits there for what seems like an eternity trying to will himself to the bathroom. Dozing, head in hands, palms rubbing sore eyes, his day hangs in the balance. It's 50-50; he could fall sideways back into a jet lagged slumber or lurch forward

into his shoes and an ugly, painful, jet lagged run. "Oh God." Either way he's going to feel like crap all day.

His hands fall to his sides and he inhales deeply, looking up at the walls around him and says; "All right. You can do this. Up and at 'em." He leans forward and shifts the weight onto old, stiff legs, straightening up and stumbling forward. A quick brush of the teeth and then the hunt begins.

He locates the travel bag in the corner of the room. In a side pocket he finds where he has crammed all his running gear. He has a pair of shorts, a shirt and a hat. Digging deep into the main pocket of the bag he extracts a pair of shoes sheathed in a plastic bag to keep them from infecting his crisply starched shirts with their malodorous demeanor.

"Socks...Crap! No socks" he says to the bag like an incantation as a second deeper search reveals no running socks have been packed. Or maybe they were lost in security? At this he smiles, the absurd image of one of those goofy TSA rent-a-cops fondling his socks brightens his mood. "OK, bare-back or dress socks?" He opts for a nice pair of blue and red faux argyles, even though his 7th grade gym teacher assured him that colored socks would lead to blood poisoning. It seems preferable to the blisters.

He unbolts the double latch and trots out into the early morning dimness to fight the maniacal traffic and endless cement of Atlanta. The air is cool and relatively clean. Later the smog will set in and running will become like swimming in sooty slime. Chalk one up for the morning. There is an elderly woman in a nightdress sitting outside the neighboring room smoking a cigarette. "Morning..." he says tipping his running hat.

"Good Mahnin" she returns in a southern way. "Nice Socks..." One of them is surely a hallucination.

He smiles and limps down the stairs to the road. Nothing special today. Just try to put one foot in front of the other. Anything is a win.

He knows that when you travel on business you have to get up early and work out. If you don't you're screwed and then you have to live with it. It ruins your whole day, sometimes your whole week. Even if you stay in a single time zone you can expect jet lag. You can plan on your performance and energy level being 60% of normal. Any significant time on a plane will tie your muscles up in tense knots and they don't shake out easily.

Being a frequent traveler he has to expect bad nutrition, lack of sleep, dehydration and too much time sitting in uncomfortable chairs. There's really no good way around it. As the psychologists tell us, acceptance is the beginning of healing. He doesn't try to get track workouts in or long runs. He knows that the main focus of working out on the road is doing something; anything. You have to

check the box. You have to get out the door. Like running the marathon, you have to focus on that next telephone pole and forget about the rest of them.

He crests a hill at the one mile mark and feels his legs starting to shake out a little. Each step still feels wooden and constructed from will power. There is no flow. Fuzzy looking people look up laconically from the bus stop as he trundles by. He smiles. How different is his world? "The only difference is that my bus has wings," he muses. With any luck he'll start to feel 'normal' at the end of the run and stretch it out a little.

His biggest fear is that skipping this one day will lead to skipping another and another and another. He is not going to let the bastards stop him from working out. He could try to run at lunch or maybe in the evening before dinner. He knows that this would be frowned upon and subtle disapproving glances would happen. Like some sort of nasty habit that they don't really want to know about and surely don't want to be involved in.

He supposes that he could run after dinner, late into the night. His body would be more relaxed, but the lack of sleep would be catching up by then and he would be unmotivated and exhausted. A harder thing is pushing away the food at dinner after starving through an all day meeting. You can be guaranteed that lunch will be late and will be pizza. Chances are he'll not have the willpower to avoid the rich, company-paid fare at dinner. It wouldn't be the first time he'd spent a late night on the treadmill with a gut full of filet mignon. No, the best thing is to get it out of the way early.

He knows that when he gets back he'll feel refreshed and awake, ready to go. More importantly he will feel that he has triumphed over the evil inertia. No matter what villainous and foul plans the business world has for him he'll have gotten his work out in He'll have that going for him. He also knows that by 10:00 he'll start to feel fatigued and funky as the good running chemicals bleed off and are replaced by cheap coffee and inactivity.

Frantic cars and SUV's zoom by alongside, rushing to get to work, or day care, or somewhere. He jogs on into the rosy glow of a rising sun. He breathes deeps and feels the wash of wellness begin to replace the funk.

There's a last little down hill into the hotel parking lot and he stretches it out a little to look good for the cameras. Panting and wet he pushes through the doors into the lobby. A cup of coffee and the ubiquitous USA Today await. "Let's see if I can drag my ass out of bed tomorrow" he says as he heads for a quick stretch and the shower.

The Midnight Mill...

Introduction:

When you travel for business, you have to squeeze your work out in. This story chronicles one of my weeks on the road when I managed to get it done.

Sometimes the worst situations make for the best runs.

The 'weirdness' factor can change your state of mind and open the way for epiphany. That's how I found myself watching a Madonna movie with the mute on Tuesday night at 1:00 AM on a treadmill in Baltimore and then an old Naked Gun movie on another treadmill at 1:00 AM Wednesday night in Birmingham.

It was a whirlwind business trip. Not unlike hundreds of similar business trips I've been on in the last twenty years. With changes, I hit twelve airports in three days. For you road warriors who know the code, that's "BOS-PHL-MSP, MSP-PHL-BWI, BWI-CLT-BHM, BHM-CLT-BOS"...And I got my runs in!

That translates to starting in Boston, spending a day in Minneapolis, a day in Baltimore, and a day in Birmingham and then back to Boston. I do this kind of whacky travel all the time. I always have and probably always will. You have to go where the customers are. But, as we mid-packers know, you also have to get your runs in!

You have to find time for the important stuff! No, really, if you let little inconveniences, like seventeen-hour days slow you down; you might as well pack it in.

One of the great things about running is that all you need to carry is shoes and shorts and you're good to go. Of course, in the winter, if you want to run outside you need to expand your kit significantly. On this trip I decided to travel light. I left the sweaters at home. Guess what? Even the worst hotels have treadmills now. If you don't mind making like a hamster, you're in-like-Flint.

Minneapolis was on Monday, an off day for me, no running required. Unfortunately, with the time change I didn't hit the rack until 2:00AM body-clock time. Tuesday morning came too early in Minneapolis for me to make the work out. Work all day. Fly all night. I got into Baltimore around Midnight. That was when I decided enough was enough and I needed to get a run in.

It is a bit of professional rebelliousness to suit up and head out in the wee hours on a business trip. It's my way of poking the system in the eye. "Sure, you can make me work 68 hours in four days, but you can't make me screw up my %\$^&^ training!"

I checked in, suited up and went to the 'exercise' room. They used to lock these rooms at 10:00 PM, but with the new key-card access, you can get in around the clock. I mounted a treadmill right in front of the TV dangling from the ceiling.

I didn't want to be too obnoxious, so I put the subtitles on and muted the sound. This turned out not to be a great inconvenience, but more of a slight coup d'état. There was a Madonna movie on and the lack of sound plus subtitles added significant quality to the viewing experience. It gave the poor acting and insipid dialogue a bit of movie-house aesthetic. It reminded me of film class in school where they made you watch some random French film noir movie with the subtitles.

There I was, pounding out the miles, slinging sweat and engrossed in the 'foreign film' version of Madonna on some desert island with some young fisherman. It was a hoot! I'm telling you the combination of sleep deprivation, exercise and a goofy movie can really make your day!

The next night it was a different city with the same scenario. I hit the Holiday Inn in Birmingham, Alabama around midnight. I had so much fun the night before I decided to do it again. This time there was an old 'Naked Gun' movie on. I found myself grinding out the midnight mill with Frank Dreben and Police Squad. I almost did a Fred Flintstone flip laughing when Frank Dreben turns to O.J. Simpson's character and says, "We're going to have to be like midgets at a urinal...Always on our toes..."

Take my humble advice. If you have to go on a trip, bring your shoes. You'll have more memorable moments and you'll feel better too.

For example; I remember doing speed work on the roof of a hotel at night in Denver. Another time, in Golden Colorado, I ran up the side of a mountain before dawn. I reached the tabletop just in time to be greeted by a panorama of mule deer and birdsong in the foreground against a backdrop of the sun rising red over Denver like a magnificent epiphany. You can't buy moments like those.

I went running in Tokyo once in the early AM. Waiting for the elevator I realized they had piped early morning birdsong subtly into the speaker system. How's that for ambience? I remember the looks on children's faces in India to see me run by. The look was not "Who is that?" The look was "What is that?" I must have been a alien apparition in my shorts and singlet; 200 pounds of pasty white New England Alien puffing out of the morning mists.

Many times your best moments come at strange times in strange places when you're too tired. That's what makes it special. That's what makes it worth doing.

The Minnehaha Express

Introduction:

I really enjoyed this run. I usually don't like running in the morning, but this was one of those strange epiphanies. The hard part is getting out the door. Once you're out the door, anything can happen.

Since publishing this I was upbraided by some cautious souls that I shouldn't be telling people to run on train tracks because they might meet a train, which would most likely be to their disadvantage.

When I run the rails I try to be cautious. First, I look at the tracks and see what kind of shape they're in. Active rails will be well maintained and the rails themselves will be shiny and rust free. Secondly, I don't wear headphones, so I can hear approaching trains. Third, I stay off the track itself, or at least to one side, especially on blind corners, where I can leap out of the way if necessary. Finally, I keep my head up and pay attention.

Don't run on the high speed commuter rails, those trains go too fast. I have met and greeted many freight trains. They move slowly, especially through cities, and have never posed a threat.

The good news is that more and more of the old rail system is being converted to rail trail and you can get the scenery without the trains!

Rail running in Minnesota reveals some basic truths.

Finding the time and place to run on business trips is hard. It is at its worst in the winter. You have to drag all your clothes with you. The sun comes up late and goes down early. The roads are narrowed by snow. Up where the Mississippi river starts, it's cold.

What's a dedicated runner to do when work banishes you to Minnesota? My first choice was to run on the treadmill, but the 'out-of-order' sign turned my warmer ambitions aside. Not to be discouraged, I returned to my room and suited up for another outdoor adventure.

Even when I knew that the advice would be useless, hope sprung eternal, when I asked the front desk clerk for a good 6-8 mile loop. He was clueless. I'm not surprised. They usually are.

Reactions typically range from disbelief to amazement when I show up in my gear before sunrise looking for 'a good hour run'. I still ask. Some glorious day I'll be surprised when I find that one desk clerk or night manager in North America who is also actively training for the local marathon. It was not to be this day. As usual, I would have to blaze my own trail.

Heading out into the dark January morning of Minnesota, I'm struck by how much it reminds me of those pictures being sent back from the Mars Rover. For the remainder of the week I'll be playfully correcting people, "That's not Mars, that's Minnesota. They've just colored the snow red!"

Ironically enough, by some twist of meteorological fate, it is warmer in Minnesota than my homeport of Boston this day. It is quite comfortable, in the mid teens, with no wind. I pick a direction and run. Nothing but the crunch of the snow and the sound of my steamy breath breaks the morning hush.

This is my lucky day. Shortly after leaving the hotel, I come upon a railroad track. I pick a direction and follow the rails for a nice out and back.

Railroads are the industrial revolution's gift for runners. Our country is crisscrossed with active and abandoned rail beds. Each one is a potential run waiting for us.

What do I love about rails? First of all, it's almost impossible to get lost. Second, by order of the US government in the 19th century they have virtually no hills. Even out in New England where I live, or in Atlanta where I have an office, the maximum grade is 3%.

Third, the running surface is extremely predictable. Railroads are made up of the 'bed' on which the 'ties' are laid with the rails run on top tied together with 'fish plates' and spikes. Unfortunately, my cadence does not line up with the standard spacing of the ties. I find myself stutter stepping and hopping to keep from stepping in the gaps between the ties.

On this morning in Minnesota the ice and snow have accumulated to fill in the gaps and leave a reasonably level running surface.

When I was a kid we used to walk the rails and read the dates that were stamped on nails driven into the wooden ties signifying when they were laid. Many were from the early 1900's. That always impressed me. Here were 90+ year old logs that 'lived' through the ups and downs of the 20th century.

The glory days of railroad building were the 1800's. They were the high tech wonder of their time. They opened up the country to settlement, accelerating the pace of change and banishing the wagon trains to history.

Now it has come full circle. Those of us who choose to use bipedal locomotion reclaim the tracks and beds of the country. As I chug along on my morning route, I look down and am reminded of the gangs of Irish immigrants who built these roads by hand with picks and shovels and brawn. I wonder if I have blood relatives long lost in the Irish Diaspora that 'gave up the ghost' dragging these very ties into place.

Thoreau, when complaining of the tracks that ran abutting Walden, jokes about the 'sleepers' under the rails. ('Sleeper' being a synonym for tie and a wry pun from Henry to describe the dead Irish 'sleeping' in the wake of the tracks being built.)

A fourth great reason to run the rails is that they go through some interesting places. These roads were laid out 100+ years ago and plumb the heart of all the old industrial centers. Because of the grade requirements, the roads wind their way along circuitous routes to avoid valleys and mountains. In cases where they couldn't be avoided, the 19th century engineers brute-forced through with spectacular 'cuts', 'fills' and trestle bridges that Dr. Seuss would be proud of.

On this morning I don't see any trains. They have been through here recently, because the rails are shiny and rust free. The snow has been flattened. The one drawback of running the rails is that you may encounter trains. When you do, it is advisable to yield the right of way to them. They are slow and loud, and can't stop very quickly.

I see some animal tracks. It looks like small deer and coyotes. They are using the rail too in their daily dance with life and death.

At one point I find a spur with a score of railcars ingloriously abandoned, (the rail company might say 'strategically positioned'). They loom hauntingly in the pre-dawn stillness, mammoth, lonely and graffiti strewn. I pass behind bakeries and stores, bustling with their early morning activities. There are some lovely warm cooking smells hanging in the frosty air.

On my way back I scare the heck out of some lonely souls walking the rails to work in the morning. The last thing they expected was my spectral form crunching down on them and shaking them from their reveries with a chipper "Morning!"

Where I live in Massachusetts, many of the abandoned rails are being turned into running trails. We all think this is a good thing. It's great that we are embracing this legacy, and putting these strips of real estate to use, (I'm surprised the developers haven't figured out how to build long, skinny houses on them!)

This long, flat strait road once represented technology and progress. Now it represents a similar journey for me. I'm thrilled to be able to hop the excursion express to escapism for one quiet morning. My journey ends as I pull into the hotel station, steam pouring from my engine, and head off to another day's work.

Sneaking in the Notch, just below the eyebrow

Introduction:

This was an ugly jet-lagged run in a beautiful place. I've always loved New Hampshire. I went to college there. It's a simple rugged place with forests and great granite mountains.

This is another great example of exploring different places with running. All you need is your shoes and you're off!

Sometimes you just have to sneak in a run

The air was wet and crisp, about 29-30 degrees (that's around 0 for you Canadians, eh?) The mountains rose stark and massive on all sides. The sun was going down, already hidden behind the peaks. I pulled in around 7:30 after three and a half hours of windshield time. The park was abandoned except for one empty car.

I wriggled out of my suit and tie and into my shorts and togs behind the steering wheel of the rental car. I had to put on four shirts. The two running shirts I had brought with me and a couple T-shirts just to keep the chill off. I wasn't expecting it to be this cold in May.

No time to stretch, just hit the bike path. No time to think about it, or give that little voice a chance to pipe up with "What, are you daft?" Limping off the hours of driving I plunged into the forest.

Sometimes you just have to go for a run, and sometimes you have to sneak it in. Sometimes you have to trick the world and steal an hour from the busiest of days. Sometimes sneakiness is acceptable, especially when from this sneaking comes sanity. These sneaky runs can turn out to be the best ones, like finding a 20 dollar bill in a coat you haven't worn for awhile. A sneaky run can be a surprisingly rewarding semi-forbidden pleasure.

I had left behind the upset clients, demanding boss and peevish employees in Quebec City after lunch. Sometimes I fly, but there is still no good flight direct from Boston to Quebec City, so I drive. It takes six to eight hours, depending on road conditions and number of breaks. You lose cell phone coverage for a couple hours in the mountains, but with a couple good audio books it beats the insanity of changing planes in Montreal.

Everybody knows I travel. Travel can be a good smokescreen. I get to hide some runs 'in the cracks' because of all those regular stretches of unexplained radio silence that comes with travel. There are blocks of time when I'm on the road where it's perfectly fine that nobody knows where I am or what I'm doing.

When you go between Massachusetts and French Canada, there are three possible direct routes. They are all beautiful, mountainous and panoramic. In the winter the ice pours out of the sheer rock face in blue hues and the snow lays many feet deep on all sides. In the fall you get the spectacular color of the leaves; scarlet and orange maples, yellow birches offsetting the green firs. In the summer the granite peaks peek from a lush green sea of forest. I love this part of the world.

You can take the western route through the Green Mountains up past Montpelier and Burlington Vermont. This is the fastest route to Montreal. However, if you're headed for Quebec City, it's better to skirt the border of Vermont and New Hampshire, cutting diagonally across from Concord to Lebanon. Then you take a hard right in White River Junction due north to cross the border in Swanton Vt.

This sneaky runner knows that there is a side trip. If you stay on Route 93 north it winds through the White Mountains. About an hour north of Concord the state of New Hampshire humbles the great highway down to a single lane through a treacherous pass known as Franconia Notch. (Hey in Mass. we got 93 down to one lane too, but it took 15 Billion dollars).

It was in this notch that I ran last week. There was a fresh snow on the ground but this did not deter the signs of spring. All the bushes and trees were pushing forth this years new leaves giving the forest a fuzzy look. Lafayette brook was more than babbling from the new snow melt. Water was trickling from every nook and cranny in the mountain side.

It is a unique place. Granite mountains rise up thousands of feet on all sides. Giant chunks of rock lay about willy-nilly down the sides where glacier's retreat or recent rock slides have left them.

It is not the stark barren rock of the Southwest. This rock is alive with stubborn green growth. I ran by one granite block the size of a one-car garage that had a tree growing on the top of it. The tree was quite happy, nestled there in a carpet of moss. It was like some giant's dish garden.

It is a hostile place in the winter, but at the same time, in the notch all is wet and alive. It has a misty rain forest micro-climate. I snuck through here in the fall and pulled off in the basin, just to think and look around. At that time I wrote this in my journal:

<Begin excerpting here>

"In The Notch" 8/13/03

The White Mountains are not so white today. They have cast off their cragginess for a fun, orange comforter. Not so brilliant as the fiery sugar maples, but rusty and brown, like oaks and birch.

The Majesty of the gray peaks inspires one's soul. Thrust up granite from fiery tectonic bowels. Scraped raw by recent glaciers. It is a young country, still angry in its wounds. The fractured walls seem recently rent and torn and broken. The stony bones yet to be covered by nature's comforting, healing, green hand.

<End excerpt>

On this day of my sneaky run it is cold and damp and green and fuzzy in the Notch. It is a great place to sneak a run. I execute an out and back on the bike path.

I head out on the bike trail from the shuttered visitor center. On the wooden bridges across the brook the snow has not melted and there is one other set of foot prints besides my own. Maybe a park ranger?

As I head north on the path in the gathering cold dusk, I ascend into forest and then down under the highway and up to profile lake. The profile in reference here is 'The Old Man on the Mountain' rock formation that is/was a famous landmark in New Hampshire. It is gone now. There is no old man's profile. There is only a piece of his eyebrow. The rest fell off last year.

The park service was quick to act. All the signs were switched from 'how it was formed' to 'why and how it fell off'. Thus, with a little creative signage modification, they didn't miss a beat. If you want to know what it used to look like, find one of the new NH quarters and you'll see the Old Man immortalized there.

Profile Lake is dark and silent. The water is clear and clean but dark from the potash and iron content of the soil. There are rumors of trout and salmon, but tonight nothing moves in the mist. It is too cold for May flies and frogs alike.

Further north, the trail runs into Eagle Lake and the Cannon Ski area, now dormant for the season. Many inviting trails veer off from the bike path, but I don't have enough faith in my orienteering skills to go venturing into the woods at dusk in the mountains. Many people have died here, being surprised by the changes in weather, and overcome by the elements.

Not this day. Maybe on some future sunny morning or afternoon when business again calls me north. Then I'll sneak off again to the Notch and steal a run. Maybe I'll hike up to the 'eyebrow' and take a look around. This place is so massive and alive it fills me up for days with its majesty.

I horrify a salesman on the pay phone chugging out of the woods, steaming like an ill-treated horse. All the aches are gone and the body if not alive is at least awake. I further horrify by stripping down in the darkening cold to throw my dry

business clothes on for the three hour drive home. Now I am self satisfied and smug at having stolen a run in this forbidding, beautiful place.

Take my advice. Find those cracks in your busy existence to sneak a run. All true running addicts know that these can be your favorite treasures. These sneaky runs are yours alone and cannot be taken away. They are just one more poke in the eye for all those dopes who say "I just don't see how you find the time to run every day".

You can't find time unless you're looking for it.

Sneaking in the Notch, Part II

Introduction:

I went back later in the spring, right before my car accident, and ran up Lafayette Mountain. It was gorgeous. Genuine epiphany material. I really did miss my dog. He really would have loved this run!

A letter to my dog

Dear Buddy,

How are things since I left? How's the family doing? The squirrels? Your bone collection? I think you gave me poison ivy. Sorry I had to go on this business trip and leave you in your cage.

I wish you could have come with me. As I told you, I'm spending the next couple of days at my office in Quebec City. It's a great time of year in Quebec; the weather is great. (As the old joke goes; "summer in Quebec is two weeks of bad skating").

I drove up yesterday through the White Mountains and Franconia Notch again. This time I planned it so that I could have some extra sunlight and get some trail running in.

You missed a great run Buddy. I wish you were with me. You would have loved it. I stopped at the "Bridle Path – Falling Waters" trail out of the trail head at the Lafayette Campground.

I know that as a mostly black border collie, you don't like running in the hot weather. Well, you would have loved the weather yesterday. It was perfect running weather for man and beast. It was a misty-tending-towards-drizzle sixty degrees. The clouds hung thick and gray obscuring the tops of the mountains.

The green firs steamed with mist. It was like a cool-weather rain forest. Every thing was so green and every green thing dripped with moisture. Another thing you would have liked, Buddy, was that there were no bugs. I don't know if it was still too cold or what, but there were no deer flies, no mosquitoes and not even those tiny no-see-um black flies that plague New Hampshire.

I really didn't know what to wear. You don't have that problem of clothing choices that is peculiar to the naked ape. I went with some high cut shorts and a short sleeve Coolmax.

These I accessorized smartly with hunter orange running gloves (courtesy of the North Medford club that I picked up at the Willard Brook Ramble) and a Ronzoni

hat from the marathon converted to a bush hat with a red bandana. I wish they still gave away those Ronzoni hats.

This was the hat with the red plastic visor from 2002 that had 'Compaq' written on it. Buddy, you know how to convert a hat to a bush hat for trail running? What you do is take a bandana and a few of those ubiquitous safety pins (that we runners have everywhere), and you pin the bandana to the back of the hat. The bandana hangs down, Lawrence of Arabia style, and keeps the sun and the bugs off the back of your neck.

Getting back to the run, Buddy, you would have loved every inch of it. You might have been a little scared to jog through the tunnel with me under Route 93 from the campground to the trail head. I would have had you on the leash. Even though I didn't see a soul the whole time that I was on the mountain, there were thirteen cars in the trail head parking lot.

You would have enjoyed the 'open pit' toilet facilities. If you think a porta-john provides an exquisite olfactory medley to your big dog nose, one whiff of this thing would put you in orbit! But, hey, 'Any porta-john in a storm', eh?

I had planned to try to do some modified trail speed work. I didn't know what the topography was. My plan, (if you could call it that), was to run easy out 16 minutes on my watch, do 4-5 long pick ups and run easy back.

Soon after entering the trail I was enveloped in fir and gold-birch forest. With the misty day, it was dark and primeval. The trees were thick, impenetrable on all sides. They weren't big trees, but they were lush, verdant and all enveloping. Buddy, you could probably navigate the undergrowth, but I wouldn't even try to penetrate these woods.

If you had been with me your big ears would have picked things up, but for me there was no noise. The trail hugs a brook, maybe 6-8 feet across, which cascades down the granite face of the mountain. There was no discrete noise. There was only the white noise of the falling water thrashing its way down the granite into the valley and profile lake.

You would have loved the trail, especially the first half mile or so. You might think that with the drizzle the trail would be muddy, but it was not. Those few places that were soft were easily skirted. Most of the footing was soft packed clay with roots and bits of stray granite chunk poking out here and there. It was very nice footing for strong strider like you.

The only thing that may have discouraged you was the grade. The initial bits of the trail were not tremendously challenging but had a constant uphill grade of 5-15%. This would have been perfect for my pickups if it had stayed that way. It did not.

I'm not sure how you would have done. The trail turned to follow the cascade straight up the side of Mount Lafayette. Straight up. Buddy, you would have had to leap up stone staircases taller than you, like a goat, to keep up with me.

In spots I definitely would have had to portage you across the freshet. Even though I know you consider yourself a poster-dog for agility training, I think you would require some encouragement where the trail leaps from stone to stone across the rushing water or across a slippery log.

Those places where the climb went to 80+% grades and it was hand over hand on the rock face, you would have swallowed your pride and asked for a lift. However, I do wish I had some sharp long toenails like yours built into my old Gel Cumulus. At times my coefficient of friction was questionable.

Needless to say, my ill conceived plan for speed work didn't work out, but I think I got a good quad work out. I tried doing some acceleration up the trail, but having to leap about with tired legs was just too dangerous.

You would have understood if you had seen it. Choosing the wrong foot planting spot or catching a root could cause a problem, and you weren't there to run to the rangers for help like Lassie.

I was limited to 30 second surges in the relatively predictable patches, but I think I got a pretty good work out none the less.

I've done some trail running before. I like it. You and I run the trails behind our house every week. Those trails are easy compared to this Falling Water Trail. I do recall similar running at the 17 mile Wapack trail race a few years back in New Ipswich New Hampshire.

That race was a hoot. You would have liked it, but three and a half hours stumbling around in the mud would probably be too much for even you. I know it was close to being too much for me! Up and down 3 or 4 mountains in the woods. It was my introduction to that subspecies of Homo sapiens; the trail runner, (trailus-prodigious-maximus)

To call it trail 'running' is technically a misnomer. From what I remember, there was mostly walking up the mountains and swinging from tree to tree down the mountains. The trail runners have figured out that you can make about the same speed 'power-walking' up the steep bits as you can by trying to run.

I remember the leaders passing me on their way back in. They were like magical little gnomes leaping effortlessly from rock to stump and swinging from tree to tree, all the while moving along very fast. They were strange skimming monkey people appearing and disappearing in the mist.

This trail was like that, except steeper. The trail hugged close to the brook. It crossed and re-crossed to find purchase on one bank or another. The AMC had been through here and engineered rude granite staircases up the sides in places.

The brook itself fell in constant water falls from the granite face. Buddy, you would have liked being able to stop and slurp fresh mountain spring water the whole length of the trail. I did slake my thirst. I figured, what's the worst that can happen? I catch Giardia. All things considered, I could use the time off and the weight loss.

The granite was red in places from iron deposits, but otherwise grey with white specs. In some pools the water swirled with a bluish hue. The water was cold from mountain snow that still hugged the higher reaches. There may have been fish, but I didn't see any and I didn't see how they could climb those falls.

If you had been able to tough it out, Buddy, the trail turned away from the falling water and off across the side of the mountain on another meandering packed soil path after about 25 minutes of upward struggle. I followed this a little ways, but I was out of time. Eventually, the signs said, this trail ends up at the Mount Lafayette hikers lodge. Maybe I'll do that another day.

Buddy, here is the tricky part about running up the side of a mountain...you have to get back down. You would think that going down would be easier, but it's not necessarily so. By the time I turned around my quads were beaten up. Guess which muscle you use for slowing your descent?

At this point the drizzle picked up. The rock faces and roots were getting a little slick. With my legs rubbery it got exciting in places trying to determine what footing would hold and what would not. Buddy, you would have had ample opportunity to file down those toenails skidding on the slick granite.

When I hit the packed soil trail at the end the running was weightless. This is where you would have flown like a black and white torpedo. It was joyous running, all warmed up from fighting the mountain, to be able to finally stretch it out and fly.

You might have been scared, because just then, as I was nearing the trail head, there was a terrific flash and explosion of thunder. The heavens opened up. The rain came in torrents just as I was leaving the trail. Large heavy tropical rain drops rinsed the sweat and mud from my body. It was great. It was like an epiphany of sorts, the perfect ending to a great trail run.

I had an ear-to-ear grin as I jogged back to my rental car. I was drenched. I wriggled into some dry clothes under the porch roof of the camp office and was on my way north to work.

Anyways, Buddy, I thought I'd drop you a quick note and share this experience with you, because I knew you could appreciate the beauty of it. Next time you're

coming with me and we'll have a blast leaping from rock to root and splashing in the icy stream.

I'll be home tomorrow. I don't think I'm going to stop on my way home, because frankly, I'm a little sore and I don't want to sully the pristine memory of yesterday.

See you soon. Lick the kids for me.

Chris,

Get on your Houston Hobby Horse...

Introduction:

I had a customer near the airport in Houston that needed attention. I was training for a marathon, coming off an injury.

It's tough to train in the road. Some of the places you go are not pretty and are not conducive to running. I'm sure there are pretty places in Houston, but down by Hobby isn't one of them. The trick is to take these places and make them interesting for running by exploring them.

Four nights running at Houston Hobby

Night One... 'Watchin' them planes'

A few weeks before the Boston Marathon I set a PR. The distance was unknown, but it was definitely a personal best. I set a personal record for circumnavigation of a regional airport.

When you're on the road traveling on business you have to get creative sometimes. It is the only way you will be able to will yourself into your shoes and out the door after a twelve hour day at a taxing client. You have to have a sense of adventure, (and humor).

You've all heard about the glamour of business travel, right? Lot's of posh hotels, limousines, starlets and great food, right? Wrong! I've been doing it for twenty years and the truth is that it is exhausting.

Travel keeps you away from the family you draw strength from. It is plenty of bad food, sleep deprivation and wasted time stuck in cars and airplanes with your body cramping and sciatica crawling up the back of your leg like a gang of angry scorpions! When you're trying to train for a race, it can be a real pain.

For me running becomes the life preserver I reach for to keep from being sucked down into the world of airport insanity. I see these guys in the airport lugging their laptops around, disheveled and overweight. They are trapped in the traveling life like zombies; like hamsters on a treadmill. I've seen guys get sucked in and devastated by opportunities for adultery and alcohol. Running is better choice.

My runs, even in the jet-lagged evenings and the groggy mornings, even on the creaky hotel treadmills, allow me to keep my humanity. They are the light at the surface that I swim towards to keep from sinking into the abyss.

I came back that first night to my hotel, right next to Houston Hobby Airport, and as I was parking the rental car a funny thought crossed my mind. "I wonder how far around an airport is?" Think about it. What would you guess?

Airports are fairly compartmentalized. They typically, (especially these days), have big fences around them. If you figure a runway is a couple miles long...then what would be the circumference of the whole shebang? Maybe three miles by four miles?

Hobby is a small, old regional airport. It was slated for the trash bin back in the seventies, but Southwest refused to be forced to move to the new IAH international airport. They actually took Houston to court and won. Southwest is still there.

I was looking for an hour or so run. I headed out. I ran on whatever road there was and kept the fence on my left shoulder, turning when it turned. Occasionally I would be forced to backtrack out of cul-de-sacs or cut across scary patches of ground. The whole time an occasional 737 would roar close by overhead.

The air around Hobby is dank with industrial smells and jet fuel, not the best for a run. Being from Boston, the sixty five degree air was Tahiti-like to me. The previous week I had been running on the ice in Quebec.

It was very dark. I ran mostly sidewalks and access roads with no street lamps. It's an old neighborhood that has grown in. There are green bushes, trees, grass and weeds. At one point I found the safest footing was on the median of an access road. The median consisted of a number of elongated 100-yard ovals, like islands in the stream. I would have to dart like a frightened deer in the dark across the 50-foot gaps with cars careening down on me in the dark at 60 mph.

The neighborhoods around the airport are Korean War vintage, and interesting. They are mostly low ranches with bars on the windows. What are the bars for? My over active imagination had me wandering into gang territory. I'd be seen on the news the next day as that stupid Yankee jogging in the middle of the night around the airport. "You'all aint from around here, are ya?"

The few pedestrians I passed were surprised but nice and commented that 'they should be doing that'. I did get cat calls from a passing car, but I couldn't tell if they were good or bad cat calls. Maybe it was the local custom? How should I know? I get yelled at all the time running at night.

Houston has the same problem as most of Texas; too much darn concrete. I think it's because they don't have frost. In the Northeast we have old asphalt sidewalks with holes and lumps in them from the field stones pushing up with the cold. In Texas they have acres of old grey concrete.

Why don't I like concrete? It's too hard on the legs, and this close to the marathon I was nursing some half-dozen aches from many hard miles. My first

choice would be trails, my second is asphalt. Concrete is way up there on the punishment level, just below brick and granite.

The sidewalks around Hobby that I ran were old concrete-slab construction that had shifted over time. In some places they slanted away into the weeds at steep angles, at others they stuck up out of the grass like broken gravestones, while in others they had dissolved altogether and given way to the native vegetation.

Some of the roads are concrete too. The concrete in Houston gets a little slippery coat of some sort of mold on it from the incessant humidity. You have to be careful when it gets wet it gets slick. You can plant your foot and end up on your back looking up at the planes.

After an hour I was starting to get worried. I was out of water and possibly lost. The long day was catching up to me. How could I be lost? The airport fence was still right there, and in a few more turns, there was the hotel a little ways in the distance. Lit up like the Holy Grail. Good thing it was a tall building or I might still be out there.

I rambled in sweaty and tired to crash into an uncomfortable strange bed. That's how I set a PR on the first night of my business trip. Turns out, Hobby is about 9 miles around.

Night two...Careful, someone may steal the track!

The second night I was in a predicament. My training plan called for some speed work. One of the challenges of business travel is finding a track. Many times as I drive in from the airport I find myself looking around for stadium lights. Stadium lights mean there is a football field and chances are, around that field runs a track.

This day I got technical. I went on the internet to one of those satellite imaging sites and plugged in the hotel address. I zoomed out until I saw the unmistakable profile of the oval. I estimated maybe two miles from the hotel, behind what looked like a high school stashed in an industrial park.

That night, I rolled 'home' dead and exhausted and headed out for that track somewhere near the hotel. It was another moonless, windless 65 degree night. The route I explored was lined with those same concrete sidewalks and small strip malls with small stores. I passed a small car dealer ringed with concertina wire on an eight-foot fence. Planes still roared by every few minutes.

After a few rights and lefts and some indecision, sure enough, there was the school. I trotted down behind and, sure enough, there was the track. The only problem was that it was safely ensconced in a six foot shiny, black, chain-link fence.

Why do they lock the tracks? What the heck am I going to steal? It is probably another liability thing. You can picture the meeting; a cadre of county bureaucrats making the decision, "Better safe the sorry." Now here I am sorry I just burned what little enthusiasm I had slogging over here for 20 minutes and being stopped at the gates.

Now it was decision time. I could feasibly run my speed up and down the industrial park (on the concrete). No, I was too tired. I needed the comfort of a track. I jumped the fence. I mean, I climbed the fence and flopped into the grass on the other side.

It was nice inside the fence, a little green oasis amid the industrial sprawl. A fox started out of the shadows and disappeared across the veldt. I guess he wasn't used to seeing visitors this time of night.

It was one of those old black cinder tracks. I did some 400's, but my heart wasn't in it. After the first one, I took my shirt off. One of the things to remember about Houston is that it is very humid. Things don't dry very well. This particular shirt was the same one that I had worn the night before and it was beginning to reek like a fetid dead animal, (to put it nicely).

Now I'm thinking to myself, "What am I going to tell the cops?" Sweaty, cinder-caked and half naked running intervals illegally on the school track in the middle of the night with no ID. They'd lock me up for sure.

I finished up, got out alive and dragged back to the hotel. It was far from inspirational, but I checked the box for another night.

Night three...La Cantina Bonita, welcome to my neighborhood.

I went out for an easy run through the old neighborhood behind the hotel, away from the airport. The neighborhood was laid out in 'Leave-it-to-Beaver' style.

The houses are cute, neat ranches on well trimmed quarter acre lots. The streets are laid out in grids. I ran a snake pattern, up one street, down the next, following the grid and taking in the ambience.

In Massachusetts it was early April. Here in Huston it was mid summer by my biological barometer. The Hyacinths grew in hedges and were in full bloom. The air was thick with pungent flowery perfume. The grass of the lawns was tall lush green and perfect. They were mowing it! I was still shoveling back home.

The streets were lined with pickup trucks. I guess everybody drives a pickup truck in Houston. The locals sat out on their stoops with melodic music, Mexican food smells, cold cervesas and good conversation. Some of them had a gregarious 'Buenas Noches' for the dopey Yankee ambling by. I did manage to

scare the heck out of some poor lady walking. I didn't mean to, but pedestrians just don't pay enough attention sometimes.

That was a good night. Relaxing and mellow. I like the easy runs.

Night four...Park it!

The fourth and final night of my Houston adventure I again needed to find somewhere to do some faster work. I had some tempo on the schedule. One of the guys that works for me told me there was a park just beyond the little neighborhood that I had run the night before.

I set out to find that park. I like parks. Parks, in general, have grass and paths and make good places to run.

This one was really interesting. It was the neighborhood gathering place. There were young families walking in groups and kids on the playground.

The park was probably ½ square mile including a playground, a ball field, tennis a basketball courts, and some nice expanses of grass.

However, there was also a sense of rough edges. One of the dads walking with his family was carrying a baseball bat and I didn't see any gloves... There was a crowd of young men with tough cars congregating around the basketball court. As the sun set, most of the families disappeared and the young toughs grew rowdy, but nobody bothered me.

There was an old asphalt path that ran around the outside that I clocked at a little more than 400 meters. On this I did my tempo runs.

There I was again, the Pillsbury Dough Boy zooming around the park, huffing, puffing and slinging sweat with a big smile for all the locals. They looked at me like one might look at an addled person, with a mixture of amazement and pity.

When my legs are moving and the happy chemicals are sautéing my brain, I don't care if I look like a goofball.

There were other guys jogging the path. They were of the T-shirt and baseball hat genre. Nice guys, a little wary, but overall friendly. It seemed to me that they were just a little baffled by this apparition going fast-slow, fast-slow, fast-slow at their local park.

I have to admit that in early April my body hasn't seen much sun, and as mentioned above my shirt was almost impossible to wear at this point. As I huffed repeatedly around the path, I must have seemed like some translucent lunatic.

It was a good outing. I checked my box for tempo and lazily jogged back to the hotel to ride the elevator with some flight attendants who were horrified by my end-of-week rancidness.

Epilogue - On running and training on business trips.

Why not just stay in the hotel and watch HBO, or catch up on those 437 e-mails that you've accumulated during the day? Why not join the customer or your coworkers for a 12,000 calorie meal at the local eatery? Why drag your tired butt out against all advice into the teeth of a strange locale?

There are more good reasons to run than good reasons not to. The best reason is that if you don't run you'll feel like you haven't run. Even if you only go half as far and half as fast, it will be worth it. Even if you strap the shoes on just to jog twice around the parking lot. At least you've done something to break the pattern and keep yourself active.

You have to beware of the inactivity trap. It's easy to say "I'm exhausted, I'm going to bed." One night, turns into two, and then the week is lost and it just isn't fun anymore. Don't let the trip dictate your lifestyle choice to you. That's yours and you have to get mad and fight the entropy to keep it.

Additionally, if you go for a run, typically you get to skip dinner too! One of the hardest things to do when you're on the road is too watch your diet. I usually carry a bunch of energy bars and other portable sustenance, along with a water bottle. Traveling you can get dehydrated. Skip the buffet at the Ponderosa. Replacing a 12,000 calorie Nachos Grande with a 40 minute jog is a huge net win.

A third big reason to run in strange places is adventure. When you leave the hotel there is a sense of discovery, of treasure waiting to be dug. You can cover a whole city in a 40 minute run. You can see things from a perspective that you don't get from the car windshield. Your shoes are your passport to something fresh and new. Sure, sometimes you get the uninspiring industrial park run, but other times you get the magical day break in the mountains run.

My advice to you is; don't dread the business trip. Embrace it as an opportunity for adventure and discovery. When you're on the road you actually have more time to do your thing than less. Don't worry about the naysayers. Do it for you, leave the Nachos to them.

Cross-training with Les Habitantes

Introduction:

I've spent way too much time in Quebec City over the last decade. I got around to thinking about how for all the time I'd spent there and all the runs, I'd never written down the particulars.

I had forgotten how beautiful a city it is by spending too much time working there.

Québec City Skating – Head just a little North to the 'Paris' of North America...

November 16th 2004

There is a plaza just outside the St. Jean gate, (in the old city wall), in front of the Palais Montcalm. It's only the ides of November, but I'm ice skating on it. The knee hurts a little if I cross in one direction, but I love skating, it's like flying. It's a great combination of power and speed in the outside air, like riding a motorcycle. It's one of those uniquely 'northern' activities that just make me happy, like a kid at Christmas.

In November it's easy to love winter. We haven't been beaten over the head with it for 6 months yet and it's still a novelty. The weather is warm for Québec, mid-thirties Fahrenheit or hovering around zero if you're the rest of the world. The plate of ice is smallish and irregularly shaped. It is, after all, not an ice rink per se, but a frozen over plaza. There are no hidden pipes to create what forms naturally all over Canada 6 months out of the year.

There are 30 or so of us skating in circles as the evening crowds of tourist wander by. Sometime they stop to ponder or take pictures. Most of us are swathed in warm winter coats, gloves and hats, even though, for Québec it's really quite balmy. They dress in anticipation this time of year. They know from experience it is far better to have too much protection than to be caught unprepared in the chill of a Canadian weather change.

Québec City sits in Eastern Canada on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. If you look at the map, it's due north of Maine. I have an office there. I drive up from Massachusetts most of the time because there is no direct flight. It takes about 7 hours. It's a pretty drive through New Hampshire and Vermont.

My trip consists of pointing the car north and setting the cruise control. Besides the fauna and flora, there's nary an opportunity to tap the brakes. (Once I got stuck in rush hour traffic in Lebanon NH and had to slow down to 70 MPH) If I have time, I can stop and sneak in a run in the White Mountains or Green

Mountains or even the North East Kingdom, which can be very nice for trail aficionados.

When I get to Québec City I tend to take its charms for granted. Probably because I've spent so much time working there, I associate it with long days and stinky hotel rooms. It really is a lovely place to visit, (when you're on vacation).

I've had a number of excellent runs there. Usually at the crack of dawn, in the blistering cold, but excellent runs nonetheless. One of the interesting things about the city is its geography. Much of the old walled city sits on top of Cape Diamant overlooking the St Lawrence River. No matter where you run in the city you can't avoid climbing up and down this 200 yard tall cliff.

There are roads that go right up the cliff at 20-30 degree climbs. This is interesting considering the whole place is covered with snow and ice 6 months out of the year, but they still drive like Parisians on amphetamines. (It's ok; they have 'snow tires') My personal favorite mode of ascent is the wooden staircases. Those who live in the city don't drive, they walk. Like all very old cities, Québec is designed for walking. There are wooden staircases built up the side of the cliff in all directions, which gives running a cool hamster-habitrail feeling of discovery and novelty.

One of my old-standby runs is as follows: Leave the Holiday Inn, (down at river level). Follow Ave. Charest along the bottom of the cliff towards the river. You pass the Victorian era, still operational, Rail Station, some very pretty 17-18th century brick and stone row houses and the Port with its pleasure boats and grain elevators. At the end of Charest, take a right on Champlain, along the waterfront at the base of the cliff.

It was here where Jacques Cartier spent a winter in 1535 at a place the natives called 'Kébec' or 'where the river narrows'. Jacques tried to settle here a couple times but thought it was too darn cold and skedaddled back to France. In 1608 Samuel de Champlain, in a fit of colonial expansionism, set the roots of New France here to stay.

If you look right while running west along the river front, you'll be treated to the old part of the old city. Here on La Petite Champlain, crouching under the lee of the cliff, are sturdy stone buildings from the 1600's with narrow cobbled streets filled with souvenir shops and yummy restaurants.

The original settlers built their shops and dwelling here at the base of the cliff. It wasn't until some time later that they figured out it would be easier to defend from the top of the cliff.

Looming above La Petite Champlain are the walled fortifications of Old Québec with the grand Chateau Frontenac preeminent like a living postcard. I say this because if you look at any post card of Québec you will see the Chateau

Frontenac front and center, a magnificent fairy tale castle rising from the heart of the city. For a couple hundred Canadian dollars a night you can stay there.

If you look left, you may be surprised by a nine story tall cruise ship bellied up to the quay, its scale totally out of proportion in the old city, like a 747 in your grandparent's living room. They pull up in the night and disembark a few hundred argonauts for the day.

This is also, in August, where the Marathon des Deux Rives finish line is. The race starts over, across the river in Levis. I ran the demi-marathon (half) one year and the landmark cool feature is crossing the big old iron 1917 bridge across the river a few miles upstream. I also remember people who ran the marathon trying to get back up the cliff to their hotel rooms, ouch!

Here as well is where they have a canoe race across the river in the dead of winter, where teams of participants swim-paddle-scramble across the ice chunks to the other side. One thing you can say about the Québécoise, they aren't afraid of a little cold!

All this happens in the first mile out from the hotel. I sometimes cut up the winding streets and paths to explore the city proper, but usually continue down the bike path in the direction of Montreal to a set of stairs hidden a few kilometers yonder. These stairs must have a really cool French name, like the 'Rue Diablo' or something, but I don't know it. They are set into the back of the cliff and rise straight up to the top. I lost count at 300 and something, and I dare you to run these puppies without stopping. Even better, run them in six inches of fresh powder!

This stairway to heck dumps you out on the top of the cliff behind the fortifications on the Plains of Abraham, an open, flat bit, where the British managed to end the dispute over who ruled the new world in 1759. The Brits floated past the fort and snuck up the back side of the cliff. When the French woke up they found a Red Coat army arrayed on their flanks. The ensuing battle ended French colonial ambitions in North America, but made little dent in the French culture that was by this time firmly established in Québec.

There is now a nice 1000 meter oval on the plains. There is an inner tarmac loop for in-line skaters, a grassy infield for all sorts of outdoor sports and hobbies in the brief summer, and an outer cinder path for the occasional New England runner who needs to do some speed work. The cinder path is marked with cryptic 100 meter bricks that I've yet to figure out what exactly they are measuring.

If you left the Holiday Inn at 5:00 AM, by the time you climb up to the plains on my route you will be treated to the red ball of the sun climbing over the St. Lawrence to the east. Picture this on a crisp morning where there is an unblemished 6 inches of fresh snow sparkling on the foreground. It's really quite beautiful.

On this route I will then make my way back along the edge of the cliff towards the old fort. The 'citadel' is a massive low stone structure perched on the front of the cliff, bristling with black iron cannon, overlooking the river. It is sometimes referred to as the 'Gibraltar of North America'. It is all a big museum now, with a ceremonial contingent of soldiers for the tourists. Québec is a huge tourist destination.

One of my favorite parts of this run is the promenade attached to the cliff along the front wall of the fort. It is like something in a video game. It consists of a wooden-planked walkway of stairs and paths that clings to the fort wall, suspended in mid air over the St Lawrence and follows the line of the cliff back towards the Frontenac. You find yourself looking straight down on Champlain and across at the lights of Levis. You get some significant 'scenic views' opportunities.

The walkway spills out into a broad boardwalk under the Frontenac where tourists gather and there is always some sort of civic festival being put on. From here you can wind your way through a choice of old streets. I usually head uphill (again) out one of the citadel gates to run by the parliament building with its forest of statuary, a who's who of New France in stone. There is an actual large stone wall with parapets and the works around the old city. It is constructed of large stone blocks and looks like something out of the Knights of the Round Table. From there I wind my way back down hill to my hotel. This is probably about a 10k. When I'm lazy, I just run the bike path along the river because it doesn't require any mountaineering.

I never see many people running although the province has a strong distance running tradition. Boston Marathon geeks will be able to tell you about Gerard Cote who caused Johnny Kelly to finish second a number of times in the 1940's with four first place medals. If they are real nerds they can even tell you about Jacqueline Gareau who's first place luster in 1980 was tarnished by the trolley-hopping Rosy Ruiz.

On this night my knee is too sore to fight the hills and I take to the rink to work off my mussels in garlic wine sauce, fish soup and blueberry cheesecake, (gâteau fromage et bluets).

The skaters are a mix of locals and tourists. The locals are obvious by the power and grace with which they move. Even on this small rink, you can sense the power and agility of perennial hockey players slightly bent forward, legs balanced to protect the puck that isn't there. The Canadian women, educated on an alternate figure skating curriculum, practice twirls in the corners.

The tourists lurch about on rental skates, frequently sitting on the side and laughing with their friends at the absurdity of the night's activity. That's right, in the heart of old Québec ; you can rent skates at the plaza. The skating itself is free. Which makes perfect sense, because skating for the Québécoise is equivalent to walking.

Not only are they renting skates, but they will sharpen them for you too and there is a pigmy Zamboni that is housed here that emerges every hour to clean the ice. Only in Canada would the city officials support such a thing.

I'm in my old hockey skates, scarred with 20 years of collisions and puck marks. The blades are almost ground flat from sharpening. The eyelets I fixed with super glue a decade or more ago. You could say they are 'comfortable'. It is easier to get my skates sharpened here than in Massachusetts. The nice lady renting the skates has a robotic machine that does all the work. Only in Canada...

The guy who drives the Zamboni is wearing a NASCAR jacket and whizzes around the small surface sliding sideways in the corners, like the Dukes of Hazard. It's surreal and funny sitting there listening to piped French songs and watching Jean-Claude Duke go through his hourly dance on the ice.

My knee is ok in one direction and luckily for me everyone in North America skates counter-clockwise by default. I skate for an hour or so and then amble back through the streets to the hotel. I treat myself to a Cuban cigar, (don't tell John Ashcroft). What the hell, I'm not in training.

I walk by the place where they have a wonderful ice palace and ice sculpture display in February during the winter carnival. It's really quite something with multicolored spotlights reflecting and refracting through the ice. Even though it's colder than the surface of Mars in February, all the hotels are sold out and crowds of people are out cavorting in the ice.

In February they have a hotel entirely made out of ice that you can stay in, if you're into that sort of thing. Not me. Tonight I head back to the Holiday Inn.

Even though I'm jaded with too many business trips north, you should go to Québec sometime, you'll love it. In the brief summer they go crazy like people escaped from an asylum and the weather is great. In the winter, it's harsh, but beautiful, and just as alive.

The city is beautiful, the food is outstanding, and the women are French! The exchange rate is in your favor and it's relatively close by. Fly into Boston, New Hampshire or Vermont and take the scenic drive. Montreal, the 'big city' in Québec is only a couple hours north of Burlington, VT. From there you can drive the 2.5 hours to Québec City or take a train.

Look for me, I'll be the guy skating counterclockwise, looking like a hybrid between a tourist and a local, smelling of mussels and cheesecake.

Running the 'Hootch'

Introduction:

My other office is in the Northwest suburbs of Atlanta. I hate running in Atlanta. Atlanta is not designed for running, it is designed for driving. It's a crazy frenetic place with bad air and angry drivers. Even so, with my philosophy of making adventure where you are able, I have managed to find a couple of nice parks and have had some good runs there.

An oasis amid the traffic in Atlanta

Usually in Atlanta, when I get up to run it is dark out. Atlanta is on the western side of the time zone and the sun doesn't come up early. You could honestly say that the sun takes longer to get to Atlanta.

On this morning the sun is peeking, showing its impending presence as I leave the hotel. That's a sure sign of spring before we 'spring' the clocks forward. It's 6:00AM and there is a warm glow in the east over the Georgia hills.

In Boston it's snowing. In Quebec it's -1 degree. In Atlanta, spring has sprung. The pansies are planted full in the hotel planters, thriving in pretty riots of color, confidently unafraid of a hard frost. The crab-apples and cherry trees are in full bloom. The air is full of pungent sweetness and bird song.

On this morning, I didn't have a rental car, but I had a plan. I wanted to get in an hour run. Nothing special, just base miles to keep my legs honest two weeks after a tough marathon. I knew the Chattahoochee state park couldn't be more than 3 miles from the hotel.

I have an office close by the Cumberland mall and spend a lot of time in the northwest suburbs up by Smyrna, Vinings and Marietta. You may find me late at night doing speed work on the track at the Marietta Civic Center, but my favorite place to run is the Chattahoochee state park.

My plan was to run to the Chattahoochee, do a little work out with whatever time I had left and run back. It seemed like a much better idea than treadmill boredom in front of CNN HLN with the same awful news over and over every 10 minutes. So, I headed for the Hootch.

At 6:00 AM the city is still waking up. Even still, leaving the hotel, I was met by the roar of adjacent route-75 traffic. It's menacing and industrial, like some mad machine grinding metal and concrete into bits. It's not just background noise; it's a living scream of thousands of SUV's and tractor trailers battling on 5 lanes of cement at high speed.

Being from the Boston area, I probably don't have the moral right to complain about Atlanta traffic and drivers. Then again, maybe I'm eminently qualified, like an expert witness giving testimony.

Atlanta is badly afflicted by suburban sprawl. Evidently there has been a government mandate to replace all trees with townhouses and all fields with concrete and strip malls.

Every road seems to be a multi-lane runway for coffee-swilling, cell-phone-grasping SUV denizens trying desperately to achieve escape velocity between one stop light and the next. Atlanta has a car culture and the road network to encourage it. Pedestrians are hunted like rabbits for a hasenpfeffer dinner.

Hidden in all this cement insanity is a slow moving green river named the Chattahoochee, or to locals 'the Hootch'. The Hootch winds its way across and underneath the city of Atlanta navigating the hills with slow meandering loops.

Along the course of the river, where civilization intersects with the river valleys, the state has carved out gems of small parks. It was to one of these that I was headed.

Where I stay there are plenty of sidewalks, unfortunately they are all poured concrete. I could feel the punishment in my joints and connective tissue. However, there is usually a small strip of 'grass' next to the side walk that I can save my knees, (and test my ankles), on.

Traveling on business like I do I notice the little differences. For instance, in Quebec City it is against the law to make a right turn on a red light. In Boston it used to be illegal, but now the practice is right turn on red after a stop, (or at least a pause).

In Atlanta, apparently the rule is that you never drop below 50 MPH while running the red light, and pedestrians in the cross walk with the cross signal are worth extra points. The irony is that they all look so surprised to see me in the cross walk! (Some even stop talking on the cell phone for second) When the signal turns to 'walk', it's more of a dare than a notification of safe passage.

The intersections glitter in the slanting morning sun with the crushed detritus of motor gladiators who have lost in the arena as I head down into the reservation. After 20 minutes of sidewalk shuffling I can see the park entrance, off an access road, parallel to 75, at the bottom of a hill. There are no sidewalks here, but there is a runner friendly 'goat trail' worn into the red clay bank. I've had running shoes that have retained the red stain of Georgia clay indefinitely after only one run in the rain here.

As I clear the parking area and enter the dirt track of the park I'm struck by the isolation and calm of this little pocket of wild amid the sprawl. The highway sounds are muted by the dense underbrush and soon all that can be heard is the

river moving and the birds talking. There is the gentle padding of other runners making their way in the dawn mist.

The park encompasses the river and a good size section of wild, including some wooded hills and some swamp. The trails are graded dirt, quite wide and flat. It has a built-in 5k loop and there are always people there.

Last time I ran here in the winter it was pitch black in the morning. I had brought a co-worker from Quebec to show them the beauty of the river, and we were lucky to be able to see our feet. On this morning the sun is up, the river is high and it moves laconically next to the trail.

I see clubs of people gathering to run together, walkers, joggers, runners, people with dogs and groups from the nearby military bases in their fatigues. If you come in the afternoon you can share the road with young mothers pushing prams. It's not crowded, but there is always someone and they may even say 'good morning' with that fine, warm Atlanta drawl. The park is well maintained and there are even bathrooms and a water fountain.

This morning the Hootch runs deep, wide and dark. There must have been good rains up stream. Sometimes, in late summer, it is barely a trickle amid the sandbars.

There are pairs of mallard ducks that take the time from their mating rituals to quack 'hello' to me as I trundle by, gravel crunching beneath my size-twelves. It's like a sojourn in a foreign land after the angry commuter traffic; a pastoral haven. I don't want to leave, but I have to.

My time is up and I have to turn around. I don't even finish a full loop. Time is ticking away and I have business to attend to. I wonder what would happen if I just stayed in here today, playing lazy games in the southern sun and not thinking about board rooms and conference calls.

As I approach the parking area the highway crouches outside the gates growling like an angry animal. It breaks cruelly into my consciousness. The real world is waiting on the periphery of the park, waiting to pluck me out of my reverie.

About this point in time I realize that to get to a river, you have to run down hill (duh!) and now I'm looking up at the run home. I have to fight the frenetic metal tide uphill back to the hotel.

I make it back ok, just over an hour, well sweated, still alive and satisfied. It was a challenging run on different levels and I'll live to do it again.

The moral of the story is that in our lives we have to work to find the oases. As runners, we have the advantage of being able to create our own peace. Sometimes those oases are in the hearts of cities and sometimes they are in our

own hearts. Go now and find your own oasis. Find a spot of sanity where you can water your camel and salve your mind.

Red Rock Run

Introduction:

I usually don't vacation well. I don't like to be totally disconnected from work. Plus my family has to meet and get to know Mr. traveling business guy who is a pompous expert on everything travel related.

We ended up in Vegas because it was the furthest south I could get on my frequent flyer miles with a late reservation. I don't particularly like Vegas. I don't gamble or carouse much so I can't enjoy the real draws of sin city.

Nevertheless, I figured the sensory overload of the place would interest the family. Staying in hotels and eating out is cool for them.

Of course vacation for me means having more free time to work out. My family doesn't understand how this qualifies as vacation, but puts up with my aberrant behavior passive aggressively.

In this story I found a beautiful gem of a park just outside Vegas to run in. They hold a number of races here including an endurance race. It's a neat place.

A Vegas vacation yields a desert beauty.

The warm desert air blows my hair back. Ray Ban shades. Arm out the window, top down, cruisin' down the highway. The ravishing starlet in my other arm leans close and whispers in my ear, "Daddy, wake up. We want to go to the pool."

"Huh?"

"Get up, we want to go to the pool."

Reality coalesces and I prop myself up on one elbow in the hotel bed. "I think we're going for a ride today. We'll get you a big breakfast at Denny's and then we're going to take the car out to Red Rock Canyon."

It would be good to get off the strip. You can run on the strip, but it's ugly. I'd been getting up early and running from the MGM Grand, where we were staying, down to the Stratosphere and back in the morning, maybe 6 miles. The good news is that there is nobody up in Vegas in the early AM. The bad news is that the strip is not a great place to run. It's all cement, stop lights and bad air. The people who are up, haven't gone to bed yet!

I read in the travel guide that Red Rock Canyon was a family friendly place just west of Sin City. I talked my family into it. I figured they could picnic or something while I did a little trail run.

We loaded them up on eggs and pancakes at Denny's. I stuck to a bowl of oatmeal and picked up a couple bottles of Gatorade and H2O at the Walgreen's. Good to go. Sure enough, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area is just 17 miles west of the city. The sprawl rolls right up to its gate. The first thing we saw was burros casually breakfasting on shrubbery by the side of the road. The park maintains a herd of about 100 semi-wild burros. Being tourists, we took photos.

It had been raining the week before we got there and the desert hills were green, well greenish. Not green like Vermont in May, but as green as the desert gets.

We went into the visitor's center. The basic layout is a one-way circular tourist road that meanders 10-12 miles through the conservation area. There are a bunch of pull-off areas where you can take hikes of varying difficulty into the features of the park. I talked to the guy at the desk and said I was looking for a trail that was more than 10 miles to get a long run in. Nonplussed, (they get a lot of whackos here), he pointed me to the "Grand Circle Loop" and handed me a photocopied, hand drawn map saying it was about 11 miles and I should take some water with me.

It was a great set up. The Grand Circle roughly followed the tourist road and crossed it a couple times. This way I could meet my family at a couple points and get some fluid support. The trail was classified "strenuous" whatever that means and peaked at a 1400 foot rise from the start, and then came back down. No problem. Nice rising 10k out, nice dropping 10k back. Perfect. Maybe an hour-and-a-half jog. Then again, I was a stranger in a strange land and the desert would hold some surprises.

I slathered up with SPF 50, mixed up a ½ and ½ Gatorade-Water combo bottle and headed my Albino Clydesdale butt up the trail. It was beautiful. The weather was 75 degrees, windless with a full low morning sun. Back in Boston it was snowing again. Here I was with shorts, tank top, hat and sunglasses pounding up the trail.

The first couple miles ran me into a formation called the "Calico Hills". This is a set of red sandstone hills that rise out of the desert. The red rocks are ancient sandstone formed from great dunes that used to cover this area 100 million years ago. The striking lines of different color rock are formed by a "thrust fault" when two tectonic plates collide and the older rocks are forced over the newer. This area encompasses the Keystone Fault.

The trail was rocky desert gravel for the most part with low sage brush and yucca plants reaching out to scratch your ankles. After a couple miles it changed to sandstone and got fairly "strenuous". Turns out that 1400 feet is the peak elevation gain, but it runs you up and down a series of 300-500 foot canyons to get there.

In the calico hills the trail switched to packed red dirt. Very nice footing. I was very happy to be spinning along in this scenic venue. Running easy, smiling, up and down the canyons.

I had the road on the left and the calico hills rising to the right. The trail dipped and climbed in and out of the rocks. There were great red chunks of rock and boulders scattered about like they had been casually discarded by some catastrophic event. This part of the world always makes me think I'm running through a Road Runner cartoon.

I left the trail once thinking that I could see a better line to get down off the stone bluffs I was traversing. I ended up rock climbing to get down from a series of dead ends. My Asics were nice and sticky on the sandstone. "Stay to the trail you idiot," I said to myself.

In the bottoms of the canyons there were standing pools of crystal clear water. For the most part I didn't pass any pedestrians, but when I did they were surprised to see me churning up the steep paths, smiling like an idiot. There were rock climbers doing their thing high above, up on the cliffs.

Every once in a while I'd see a small yellow or purple flower poking out of the scrub, made beautiful by their austere surroundings. I paused at one isolated chunk of rock to look at petroglyphs carved by ancient peoples. Cool. I scared little lizards that I'd have to guess were geckos, scurrying across the path and out of site.

I was out of Gatorade-Water mix when I emerged into the parking area around 4 miles. 20 ounces and my shirt wasn't even wet. Hmm, we're not in Massachusetts anymore. My family was easy to find and I refilled my bottle. Unfortunately, my kids had drunk all my Gatorade. Cockroaches! I checked my watch. Holy Moly! I've only run 4 miles and I've been out 40 minutes. I'm not that slow. Somebody's math is wrong. They must be measuring crow-fly. OK, fresh bottle and I'm off; see you at the 10k.

The Grand Circle Trail turns away from the Calico Rocks and into a desert infield crisscrossed by washes; evidence of recent flash flooding. I look up at the sky. No clouds. Not one. Need clouds for flash flooding, right? I don't know. I keep losing the trail because of the wash outs. I find myself walking around in the desert, like a tracker, looking for footprints to follow. After a few more miles of this the trail pops back out onto the road at the mid-point parking area.

The family isn't there. I spend some time looking for the trail. The only thing I can find is a dirt road that continues up into the hills. Can that be the trail? I was hoping for something more...downhill. Then the rental Buick pulls up. Good thing, I'm out of water again. Hmm... 40 ounces and counting... I look at my watch. Holy Cow! 1:30! That's ok, I wanted to run long today...

Another fill up of the bottle and I'm off up the dirt road which sympathetically comes to a trail head after ½ a mile and the Grand Circle takes a left turn back towards civilization. There aren't too many tourists out here. An occasional hiker is startled.

The trail continues it's up and down through canyon and sage brush. I cross a nice little babbling brook and think about filling my water bottle, but don't. I rinse my hat instead which has a big salt crust across it now. The sun is higher, it's just after noon and a small breeze is all that keeps me from being hot. I come to a trail sign. 4.4 miles back to the visitor center. I look at the watch. Just over 2 hours out. I consider the 8 ounces of warm water sloshing in my bottle. Got to make it last. Oh Well, tally-ho!

This part of the trail cuts across the infield of the car road on a semi-washed out dirt road. No cover. There are Joshua trees scattered in the rocks and gravel. The plain is flat with a barely perceptible downward tilt. Perfect for finishing up. I push my hips forward and cruise.

Something squirrel-size with a white streak across its back darts across the trail. Lizard? Road Runner? Hallucination? 4 Ounces of hot water left. Dry mouth. Crusty eyes. I'm reviewing scenes from The Treasure of the Sierra Madre in my head. I think I can see the visitor center up ahead a couple miles. It shimmers low in the heat.

My sciatic starts to scream a little. I'm getting weary. I push my hips forward, square my shoulders and pick it up. No problem. A couple miles. I can see it. Nobody is dying here today.

I see a figure sitting in the trail ahead. As I come closer a woman in a white shirt and khakis sitting on a rock materializes from the shimmer. Strange...

I talk to her as I approach, "Hi, are you ok?"

"Oh yes I'm fine, thank you for asking."

"Well I'm not!" I laugh as I pass.

"You look great!" she yells after me.

These last couple miles are fairly rough and I'm struggling a little. It reminds me of the last two miles of the ES20 for some reason. I promise to let myself swallow the last bit of warm backwash from my bottle as I round the bend about 1k out from the center.

The trail tilts up out of a wash into the parking lot and I emerge, a salt encrusted apparition. I look at my watch. 2:40. "11 miles my ass!" I say to no one in particular as my family walks up to meet me.

I stretch in the shade of a vending machine shack and put on a fresh shirt. My pointy bits are chaffed, but other than that I'm great. What a run. What a nice surprise. I'm always worried that I won't be able to squeeze any quality runs in when I go on vacation with the family. This run exceeded all my requirements and expectations!

The canyon itself is outstandingly beautiful. The early March weather was perfect. The footing was soft and forgiving, even without my trail shoes. The terrain was challenging but not too "strenuous". What I thought would be a short 11 miler ended up being more like 18; perfect for my marathon training.

The fact that you have access to your support vehicle kept it from getting too miserable at the end. I went through 60+ ounces and could have used another 40! My Clydesdale albino body is not engineered to be running in the desert in early March.

What a great run. Take my advice, next time you're stuck at some awful trade show or convention in Vegas, leave the strip and head west to Red Rock Canyon. You'll be treated to numerous scenic trails of many lengths. Go for a run in the desert and purge that cruddy casino air from your lungs. It's a hoot!

Oh My Cod!

Introduction:

And...while I was painting and training, I stayed up late editing this book! There is something spiritual about the Cape. You should really rent my new house and find out for your self.

Vacation training on the Cape...

I recently spent two weeks 'on vacation' in Cape Cod. 'Vacation' is in quotes because I really spent most of the time working on a new house my wife and I bought. You could say my wife and I experimented with Latex, but you'd be talking about 30 gallons of wall and ceiling paint.

It was a nice change for me to get away from the laptop and back to my roots of wiring, painting, plumbing and spackling. Doing 'real work' has its Zen qualities. I also had to get some training in. The timing just happened to coincide with the last two hard weeks of my triathlon training. So, not only did I have to get some training in, it had to be some quality training. I didn't know where or how I would fit it in, but, as usual, I found a way to feed my compulsions.

You might have guessed that I don't vacation well, if you define vacation in the lay-around-sipping-cocktails sense. I filled two whole weeks with fixing stuff and working out. That's my kind of vacation! The only low point was that it killed me not to have internet access. The only connection point I could find was a Subway shop. I am so sick of having to eat that food just to connect to their wireless! It could have been worse. It could have been a burger chain.

My new house is in Harwich, on the elbow of the Cape. It's a vacation house in a beautiful place. (call me we'll talk about a rental!) The weather is 10 degrees cooler than steamy Boston in the summer and there is always an ocean breeze. The whole place is one big sand dune with small rolling hills, scrub pine and scrub oak.

Running Chatham Light

Chatham Light is a state park that pokes out into the sandy breaks of (Cape or Nantucket sound?) I figured out how to ride there and what with getting lost and all managed to create a nice 40 minute beach run book ended by an hour of peddling on Fuji-san.

At low tide there is an broad stretch of beach that wraps around Chatham light with sandbars and spits. I ran barefoot. It was overcast and there weren't that many bathers especially after a few minutes of running. They tend to stay within walking distance of the parking lot.

There is something mystical about the ocean. You can see how people create atavistic religions around the sea. Large trees, rendered to driftwood skeletons, crouched like the remains of ancient sea creatures stranded on the beach. Shells, rocks and the remains of unlucky fish washed in the tide lines. On a sandbar, a couple hundred feet off the beach, a crowd of harbor seals barked in a noisy pile. With the bare feet you can splash through the shallows to cool your hams.

I see how people can spend their whole lives happily running on the beach each day. It is peaceful and healing and good for the legs.

I came back with Buddy, my dog, the next day, only to be thwarted by numerous large and angry "No Dogs Allowed" signs. Instead we ran the roads until we could cut down a likely path to an unmarked coastline. In this case there weren't any anti-canine sentiments, but there was a big "Private Beach" sign that we blissfully ignored. The private beach was deserted. I spent some time thinking up good lies about whose guest I was. Maybe the nephew of that famous plastic surgeon..., but, we were never confronted. We could probably just run away if we were.

Buddy took to the ocean right away. He ran right in. He took one sniff and was smart enough not to drink it. He's a good beach runner.

Pleasant Bay

I had to get some swimming in too. A first stroke of luck was my wife showing up with a wetsuit that she found at the 'Job Lot' discount store for \$28. Oh boy! Cheap functional protection from the Atlantic chills. It was not the old ½ inch thick behemoths we used to go lobster diving in off of Marblehead (in my youth). It was a real swimming sporty suit with the thin neoprene, short sleeves, short legs and a zipper up the back. I'm mortified to say that I had problems with hair getting stuck in the zipper, and sometimes required help to be freed from the wetsuit. I know those real swimmers shave their legs and arms, but do they shave their backs?

I tried swimming in Chatham with the waves and a rip tide along the beach. It was mostly like the perfect storm, where I played the part of the little fishing boat getting swamped. I began to think about a Discovery Channel show on boat people where they died from drinking too much sea water. I wasn't pretty.

Then I discovered Pleasant Bay in Harwich, and it was quite,...well...pleasant. It is right on the line between Chatham and Harwich. A becalmed sanctuary with boats at anchor and clam diggers working the mud flats where a brackish river empties into the sea. No waves and a nice straight row of "Do Not Kill the Swimmers" pylons floating along just off the shore. Using my watch I discovered that I could do laps around these and it was about 2/3 of a mile.

I spent long afternoons swimming in the slanting sun. While my kids harassed the horseshoe crabs and built sand castles I washed the day's grit from my hair. I got some tremendous work outs in, peaking out at a long swim of almost an hour. One afternoon I also terrified the vacationers by drawing a 75 meter course in the soft sand and doing repeat sprints. Great for leg strength, but sands a layer of skin off the bottom of your feet!

Found the local track

Of course I sought out the local 400 meter oval. I found it next to the bike trail behind the high school. When I pulled in some lady in an SUV asked me if I knew where there was another track, because this one was too hard? What? People are strange.

It turns out that the baseball field for the local Cape Cod League team was just on the other side of the bushes and I could listen to, and see, the game being played. The Cape League is a famous proving ground for college talent from across the U.S.A.

I had one good workout, but the next time I went down it was one of those muggy, oxygen-less days we get in the Northeast and I had to bail. I just couldn't breathe.

The Cape Cod bike trail.

I also needed to get a few bikes in. This concerned me because there aren't that many good hills to train on in Cape Cod. I looked at the map and found my way to the Cape Cod rail trail that runs from Dennis to Provincetown, from the Mid Cape to the Tip. Fuji-san and I took it up to Wellfleet and back from Harwich on our longest ride, maybe 50-60 miles all told.

On the day I found it I spent the morning painting the garage. I think I may have damaged my lungs and it felt good to stretch the alveoli out a little. They had just put the polyurethane coat on the hardwood floors and the whole house was exuding toxic vapors. In addition, the previous residents had evidently kept some sort of animal in the garage because it smelled like...well let's just say it reeked. On top of this I spent the day spreading 3 gallons of ceiling white latex paint. At the end of the day I felt like taking my lungs out and hanging them on the clothes line, but went out to the rail trail and stretched them out instead.

It's quite pretty. The trail doesn't go by the ocean, but it does pass freshwater ponds and cranberry bogs. Except where you cross roads it is all in the woods and sheltered. It's a little bumpy in places from the tar buckling, but overall it's a worry free ride. I startled big coyote on two different occasions and saw all sorts of fauna including a baby skunk.

Since there were no real hills I did Intervals like my bike mentor taught me; up in the saddle to exhaustion, rest, repeat. I'm a terrifying sight coming down the trail up in the saddle in high gear. I had one woman say "Dear God!" when I passed. Like a galloping Clydesdale, I scare the kids.

Taper out of vacation

I'm in my taper this week, back to airports and hotel rooms. This weekend we'll see how I look in the tri. I really don't know what to expect, but I sure had fun training my vacation away in Cape Cod.

When you're out this summer, don't waste your vacation lying on the beach. Get out and explore. That way you can eat more fried clams and feel good about it!

About the Author

Chris Russell lives and trains in suburban Littleton Massachusetts with his family and Border collie Buddy. Chris is a member of the Squannacook River Runners, a small community running club in Groton Ma. Chris is a frequent contributor to CoolRunning.com.

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Readers Praise Chris Russell's work...

"Inspiring stuff Chris. ... you describe perfectly the need to run. When the brain is tired & body is stiff from this artificial existence thrust on us by modern office life, there is nothing more nourishing for the soul than sneaking in such a run. Thanks for the story."

"You're funny. I've enjoyed your columns. Thanks."

"This was EXACTLY what I needed to read today. I've been putting off workouts because we're moving and time is scarce, and I feel progressively crappier with each one missed. Thanks for the reality check - if you can do it after a flight, I can do it after loading up boxes all day... off I go!"

"Masterful job"

"Hi Chris, I just read your article about the heat at the marathon, and I have to thank you for doing such a great job of expressing what it was like out there! My experience mirrored your own ... Thanks for giving me hope and letting me know that my poor showing was no fluke!"

"Liked your article!..."

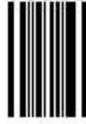
"...Just wanted you to know that I very much enjoy your articles on Cool Running. I was just re-reading the Boston one. I think you do a great job of capturing the "serious but eternally mid-packer" runner's race perspective! Thanks!" {

"Just started running, but your article had me laughing. You should have seen me at the Greek food festival on Friday night. You can have your pizza, I'll take two gyro and some spanikopita. Oh, and don't forget the baklava. How many miles will I have to log to get rid of that, I wonder?"

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