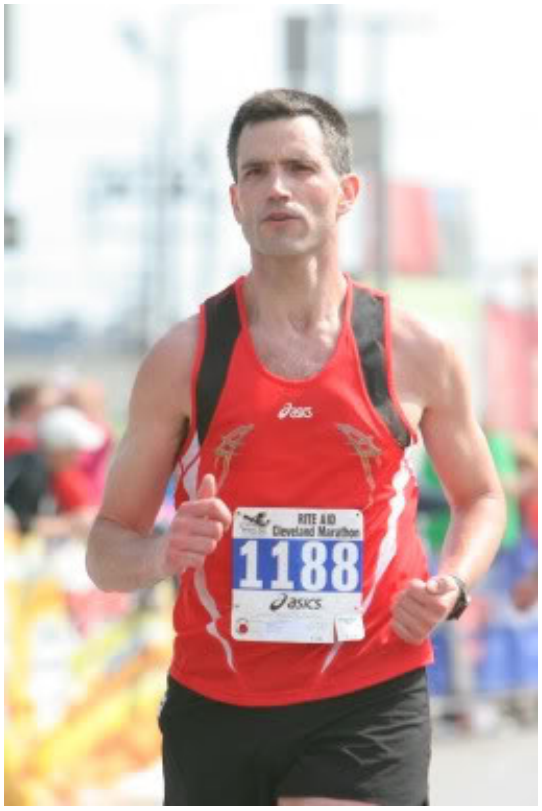
There are pieces we run on this site that withstand the test of time, and are so good, we'll rerun them. This is one of those pieces. Our Cavs beat writer John Hnat, a fantastic wordsmith, is a helluva guy that I've gotten a chance to get to know alot better over the last couple years. In addition to his work for us, John is a distance runner who is trying to qualify for the Boston Marathon. And this pursuit got even more difficult this year due to some unexpected changes in his personal life. This is the conclusion of his story. This Saturday we'll run a "one year later" afterword to this piece from John. A great, great read.

Click here for Part I of this piece ...



May 20, 2007, 7:00 AM
Cleveland, OH (Marathon Start, St. Clair Avenue and East 13th Street)

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.
(Confucius)

The Cleveland Marathon is a sufficiently large Big Event that it gets

an Official Sendoff - a singing of the National Anthem, a word or two from an Important Local Dignitary, and then a countdown to the start.

It is a time for one last reflection forward (can there be such a thing?). The announcer was counting down the time to the start. *Two minutes. One minute. Thirty seconds*
.

And all I can think about is my children. The past nine days have been a blur. What should have been a time for anticipation and excitement was instead a whirlwind of what my life had suddenly become. About a hundred conversations with Annie, all of them hopeful that they would chip some of the ice, all of them unsuccessful. A couple of days away from work in order to start life somewhere else. A new apartment rented. Furniture bought. The dozens of little errands that need to be done when starting after a separation - opening a new bank account, getting the utilities turned on (*can I be available next Friday afternoon for the cable guy?,* I wonder), and a retail blizzard that will leave the folks at Discover smiling.

At the heart of all of it is *will my kids be OK?* Annie and I had adopted Andrew and Karina from Russia three years prior. When you literally go halfway around the world to get your children, you tend to think that you are in it for the long haul. For three years, I had thought exactly that. For three years, I had kissed my kids goodnight every night, and was there to see them when they roused in the morning. But no longer. Now, with Annie and the kids staying with her parents (Annie every night, the kids on most nights) until my apartment was available, I no longer had those seemingly simple luxuries. I missed them so much

... so much ... so much ...

... nine ... eight ... seven ... six ...

Whoa. Time to focus. You're about to run a race here, son.

In the movie American Beauty , Kevin Spacey brilliantly plays the role of Lester Burnham, a middle-aged man coming to grips with his mundane existence. One of the most memorable scenes sees Spacey, brimming with newfound confidence, extort a sizable severance package from his boss, who calls him "twisted." Spacey responds, "I'm just an ordinary guy with nothing to lose." That is exactly the spirit I wanted to have for this race. I wanted to give it everything I had and not leave any gas in the tank. I wanted to do the best that I could, and not have any regrets afterwards.

I wanted to run like an ordinary guy with nothing to lose.

May 20, 2007, 7:08 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 1, by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum)

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself - and you are the easiest person to fool.
(Richard Feynman, physicist/educator)

The first mile of the Cleveland Marathon takes you down St. Clair Avenue to East 17th Street, then to Lakeside, then back toward downtown. It is not particularly scenic at first - you run next to some very ordinary brick buildings, then by high-tension electrical wires - but it improves as you turn right onto East Ninth Street, heading down the hill toward Lake Erie. Those initial turns are much too crowded, as approximately 2,500 marathoners and another 2,500 half-marathoners (both races start at the same time) try to negotiate the corners.

Matt and I were running together, and had planned to go approximately 7:20 to 7:25 per mile for as long as we could. We ran at what felt like a just-more-than-comfortable-but-sustainable-for-a-long-time pace, which is about the best way I can describe what marathon pace feels like. Unlike all of our other runs, when we chat like teenaged girls on speed, this one is silent. An occasional word here or there, and that's it. We want to save as much energy as we can for the running itself. We may not feel like we need it now, but we *know* that we will need it about three hours from now.

About three-quarters of a mile into the race, the course heads down East Ninth Street towards Lake Erie, then turns to the left just in front of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We pass the Mile 1 marker, and look at our watches. 7:09. *Shit, we have to slow down.*

The second mile of the Cleveland Marathon is one of the toughest miles of the entire race. You first run up the West Third Street hill, which is not a terrible hill, but it is challenging enough. (At the top of the hill, you pass by the Mile 24 marker - a not-so-subtle reminder that you'll be running this hill again *much* later in the race.) Then you exit from Lakeside Avenue onto the Shoreway, heading up a significant on-ramp. It is not an easy mile, but we cover it in 7:30.

The next mile is significantly easier, terrain-wise, yet when we hit the Mile 3 marker and punch our stopwatches, it reads 7:37. *7:37?* When you have run enough miles, your body knows what different paces feel like. I know that there is no way on earth that we are running at 7:37 pace; we're definitely going faster. I am convinced that the marathon organizers have missed the mark, and placed the Mile 3 sign a little farther down the road than it should have been. I tell Matt, "betcha ten bucks that this next mile will be under seven." Sure enough, we run a "6:49" fourth mile. (I use the quotes because we were running the same pace as the "7:37" the previous mile.) The fifth mile also seems to be a touch long, as we run it in "7:32." That placed us at 36:38 after five miles, or just under a 7:20 per mile pace. R *ight where we want to be*, I think. We have settled into a rhythm.

The weather is perfect - temperatures in the 50s, clouds, very little wind, and a few cooling rain drops. Speed. I am speed. The course has exited the Shoreway and is now meandering through the large homes that line Edgewater Drive.

May 20, 2007, 7:38 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 6, Edgewater Drive)

Back to reality
Oops, there goes gravity.
(Eminem, "Lose Yourself")

Remember, Daddy's in a white shirt.

The words hit me like a fist. When you are running a race, you do not even hear most of the comments made by bystanders. The words disappear, melting along either side of the tunnel that you need to be in to run well.

But that is not because you do not actually *hear* those words. Your brain simply recognizes that most of the things that people are saying are not important and have nothing to do with why you are here. It has to be the same mechanism, the same mental sleight of hand that allows a major league hitter to concentrate on hitting a curve ball while fans seated less than a hundred feet away insult him, his mother, and his mother's pets in ways best left to the imagination.

Sometimes, the words make it through those barriers. *Rem ember, Daddy's in a white shirt*
. Those are the words spoken by a spectator to my left, a woman telling her little girl that their father will be passing soon. A father and a mother and a little girl who make a
family
, who are going to meet up in a big hug at the finish line, then go home for a celebratory cookout, all falling asleep in one big bundle on the couch afterward. The kind of bundle that Annie and the kids and I would make on a cold night with a fire roaring in the fireplace and Pixar's most recent release in the DVD player. The kind of bundle that would never,
ever
happen again, at least not with the four of us.

My legs are continuing to move, and the miles are continuing to tick by. 7:16 for the sixth mile *(remember, Daddy's in a white shirt*

) ... 7:16 for the seventh
(remember, Daddy's in a white shirt
) ... 7:19 for the eighth
(remember, Daddy's in a white shirt
). We have turned at West 117th Street (the most westerly point of the course; the course route was redesigned four years ago to keep the entire race within Cleveland's city limits). I'm moving. Matt's moving. Matt's heart appears to be in it. Mine isn't. Mine wants to turn the clock back a week and a half, returning to the comfortable life that never would be again.

September 9, 2006, 8:10 AM
Berea, OH (Wallace Lake, Cleveland Metroparks)

I'm warm from the memory
Of days to come.
(Billy Joel, "This Is the Time")

Is a dream a lie if it don't come true

Or is it something worse
(Bruce Springsteen, "The River")

The Cleveland Clinic Sports Health River Run , which is always held the weekend after Labor Day, is one of the premier events in the local racing season. The crowning event is the half-marathon on Sunday afternoon. For the past several years, the routine has been the same: run the half-marathon in the morning; arrive home by 11:00 AM or thereabouts; shower and change; then collapse onto the couch and try to move as seldom as possible while watching the Browns lose their first game of the season. (Some things truly never change.)

On Saturday morning, one of the events is a series of small races for children. (They are "races" in name only; no times are kept, and no winners are recognized.) There's a 50 yard race for the four-and-unders, a 100 yard race for five and six year olds, and so on. This will be Andrew's third time and Karina's first time running the race. Andrew, cagey veteran that he is, dashes as soon as he hears the cry of

"Go!," and finishes among the faster kids. Karina ... not so much. She runs a little bit, then crouches to pick at a dandelion. I am "running" with her; a minute later, I am "dragging" her to the finish. But we have fun.

All of the kids get little medals placed around their necks; everybody's a winner today. We laugh. We pose for pictures with Matt and his family (he is also married and has two small children; his oldest also ran in the kids' race). We have fun. I imagine that it will be like this next year and the year after that and the year after that and ... well, at some point the kids will probably get sick of it, but until they do, we'll be back every year.

For some reason, this race pops into my brain as we head back to downtown via the eastbound Shoreway. *R emember, Daddy's in a white shirt.*
Those family moments are gone forever. There won't be any more of those snapshots to add to the album. Sure, I can still take them myself ... but now it won't be as part of a family. It will be as Divorced Dad, the guy who gets the kids for the weekend.

I never, ever, ever thought I would be Divorced Dad. But now here he was, staring me in the face, looking back from the mirror.

May 20, 2007, 8:20 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 11, Lorain-Carnegie Bridge)

It was a stone groove, my man!
(Ron Taylor, *Trading Places*)

By the end of mile eight, I was finally able to push the whole divorce/part-time dad/depressed as hell thoughts out of my head, and returned to running. The miles tick by ... 7:19 for mile eight (back on the Shoreway now, heading eastbound) ... 7:37 for mile nine (a bit slower because of the significant uphill on the Shoreway leading to the West 45th Street exit) ... 7:22 for mile ten (heading through some of the near West Side neighborhoods). After ten miles, we have an elapsed time of 1:13:25, about a minute and twenty seconds faster than my BQ

pace. *Keep it up for two more hours, and you're going to Boston*, I think to myself.

I can try, but it is impossible to describe the feeling of running well. The feeling of running fast, yet in control, and at a pace that feels sustainable for a long time to come, is exhilarating. It's not exactly the "runner's high" that some people describe; it is more of a feeling of peace and power at the same time. Power, in that you are doing *exactly what you set out to do*, and are doing it just as you had planned; yet peaceful, in that you are doing it in a relaxed manner. The longer you can sustain that feeling, the better your race is going to be. If that feeling deserts you early, or if you never quite get there in the first place ... means that you are about to have a very bad day.

The eleventh mile takes us up the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge, which will be the last hill for about ten or eleven miles. We hit the mile marker

(just over the crest of the hill) in 7:17. Now it's time for a downhill mile. Time to ease up just a bit while keeping the speed...

May 20, 2007, 8:28 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 12, Carnegie Avenue)

Go Daddy Go!

This sign, held by a small child on the eastern side of the Lorain-Carengie Bridge, is another smash to the solar plexus. The sign is another reminder that for many people, the Cleveland Marathon is a *family* event. One where daddies (or mommies) (or children) run, while their loved ones stake out locations along the race route to cheer them on their way to the finish.

On the Cleveland Marathon route, Mile 12 already has a depressing feature: it is where the marathon and half-marathon routes diverge. At the East 18th Street intersection, a sign points the half-marathoners to turn to the left, while the full marathoners keep forging straight ahead. I have participated in several marathons like this, in which (a) a half-marathon is raced on the same course as the full marathon and (b) the courses diverge somewhere around Mile 12. That point is always very difficult mentally - you know that the people turning the other way are less than ten minutes away from crossing the line, while you are not even halfway done.

The combined weight of that realization and my continuing sadness over my personal troubles begin to tire me. I am no longer running comfortably; I am now feeling like I have a piano strapped to my back. The twelfth mile passes by in 7:17 *(remember, Daddy's in the white shirt*
); the thirteenth, in 7:16
(Go Daddy Go!)

. The clock may say that I am still running strong, but I know that the second half is going to be much, much tougher.

May 20, 2007, 8:36 AM
Cleveland, OH (Halfway Point, Chester Avenue, just east of East 30th Street)

Droplets of "yes" and "no"
In an ocean of "maybe"
(Faith No More, "Falling to Pieces")

Now for the fun half!, I yell as we cross the halfway point. We have just completed the first half in 1:36:05, almost two full minutes ahead of

my BQ pace. That sounds promising, but it really is not; it is a sign that we have run the first half a bit too fast. Not terribly fast, mind you; we still have plenty left in the tank. We are just not sure whether we have enough to run 13.1 more miles at a speed approaching our pace for the first half.

At least, I am not sure. We have run for over an hour and a half, matching stride for stride, but I am starting to think that I should ease the pace a bit. *You're two minutes ahead of pace* , I tell myself. *You can run 7:40s the rest of the way and still qualify.*
My legs don't listen.
Harken the charge of the Light Brigade!
, they say.
We're gonna keep running 7:20s until the wheels fall off!

Keep running 7:20s and the wheels WILL fall off, my brain warns.

La la la la la! We can't HEAR you!, my legs reply, sticking their fingers in their ears. (That would make for quite an image; I really do need an illustrator.)

With the benefit of hindsight, I am convinced that my legs have shit for brains.

May 20, 2007, 9:10 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 18, Rockefeller Park)

Okay, McClane! Time for the main event!

(William Sadler, *Die Hard II: Die Harder)*

Marathons really do not begin until around mile 18. Everything before then is prologue, a two or three (or more) hour warmup to the final miles. If you have been running a smart race, then you're looking forward to those last miles. If not ... well, there's a reason why those last miles are often called a "death march."

Unfortunately, I am feeling way too tired, much more than I should at this juncture. It is another mental flashpoint: you have been running hard for well over two hours, and yet you still have another hour (or more) to go. The miles have continued to go by quickly: 7:21 for Mile 14 (Chester Avenue, through some of the seedier neighborhoods on

Cleveland's east side); 7:20 for Mile 15 (still on Chester Avenue, now out by the more gentrified redevelopment surrounding the Cleveland Clinic); 7:19 for Mile 16 (which takes us past Severance Hall and into University Circle); 7:25 for Mile 17 (through University Circle, past several museums, and into Rockefeller Park).

On one hand, I am energized. University Circle and Rockefeller Park are the prettiest sections of the entire course. University Circle in particular brings a flood of memories, as I spent my college years there. I have made the left-hand turn from Chester onto Euclid about a thousand times, but not very often on foot. (There is a distinct pleasure, almost a guilty one, of running down the middle of a road that normally sees tens of thousands of cars per day.) It doesn't hurt that these miles are downhill, adding a much-needed dose of speed to my increasingly tired legs.

On the other hand ... who am I kidding. Whatever I had, I have used it up in those first seventeen miles. I may be two and a half minutes ahead of pace ... and I may be able to keep it up for a little while longer ... but not for nine more miles.

Or can I? (As we cross Mile 17, and I see that we have run yet another fast mile, I turn to Matt and say, "how are we doing this?" Focused on his own running - and his own fatigue, I am sure - he barely mumbles a reply.)

May 20, 2007, 9:20 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 19, Rockefeller Park, near Lake Erie)

I ran. I ran until my muscles burned and my veins pumped battery acid. Then I ran some more.
(Edward Norton, *Fight Club*)

Somebody find me some butter; I am officially toast. Mile 19 was the first mile that was significantly below my BQ pace (7:49, for a cumulative total of 2:20:03). The time itself does not bother me too much; if I can just hold 7:49 for the final seven miles, I'll be eating chowder next to the Atlantic Ocean next April. But 7:49 miles, which would have seemed impossibly slow even a half hour ago, now feel like Olympic 100 meter dash pace.

Somewhere during Mile 18, Matt started

pulling ahead of me. He half-turned to see where I was; I yelled at him to go ahead. I knew that I was slowing down, and I did not want to hold him back. I vowed to keep him in sight as long as I could.

Moments later, I had given up that vow, and instead had taken a new vow to simply finish. For some reason, the course designers put in a small loop as we exited Rockefeller Park and entered the bike path along Lake Erie. The course ran north about twenty feet, then hairpin-turned to the path. During that turn, my left calf quivered badly. I knew that I could not push it very much the rest of the way. Picture an Indy Car driver having to drive the last half hour of the race on a tire that he knows is a tread or two away from a blowout; that was me. I knew that the 3:15 was out the window, and that I'd have to work hard just to finish in 3:20:23 (my secondary goal, which was my

finishing time at Cleveland the previous year).

It is the nature of the marathon to force you to re-adjust your goals. Especially when the miles get into the twenties.

May 20, 2007, 9:35 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 21, North Marginal Road, near East 55th Street)

The pain of living with yourself after a poor performance is much worse than the pain of the effort.
(Tom Byers)

My head is now down; the effort to hold it upright is too much. I need that little extra bit of energy to keep my legs moving.

I have been running along the lakefront for fifteen minutes now. I have not seen a thing.

Cars whizzing by on Interstate 90, which runs parallel to North Marginal, honk at the staggering runners. I barely hear them.

Matt must be somewhere well ahead of me by now, I figure. I do not know for sure. I am still keeping my head down. I am focusing entirely on putting one foot in

front of the other. The 7:20s of the first two-thirds of the race are now a distant memory; mile 20 was a 7:47 effort, and mile 21 clocked in at 8:04. The wheels are grinding to a halt.

Suddenly, I look up, and see Matt maybe twenty feet in front of me. And I am gaining on him. Fast. I cannot see his face, but his body language screams *Running On Empty* .

A few seconds later, I pass him. Passing another runner late in a marathon - especially one you know - especially, especially one who is one of your best friends -- poses delicate etiquette questions.

On the one hand, you *have* to pass; it's not like you have to slow down to his speed and trail him to the finish. On the other hand, you don't want to pass in too dickish of a manner.

Completely ignoring the other runner seems very rude (it may be acceptable for somebody you would not know from Adam, but not for a friend). *Some* level of acknowledgement is necessary.

Yelling words of encouragement may seem sporting; but when you are in that position, they come across as patronizing. Remember the kid in Little League who could not hit a lick, and the entire game

slowed to a crawl for a minute as the coach tried to groove the easiest possible pitch in the hope that Coke Bottle Glasses might get a piece of the bat on the ball? And if CBG did hit it, everybody would cheer a little too loudly and a little too eagerly? When you are stumbling to the finish, and somebody yells encouragement to you, you feel rather like that kid. Part of you wants to lash at the person who is trying to be nice to you. You don't, of course; he is just trying to be nice. You are just not in a position to take any comments, no matter how well-meaning. *Just let me finish in a complete vacuum. Don't notice that I am here.*

So that's what I was thinking as I passed Matt. I turned to him and yelled, "are you OK?" It was a trial lawyer

question: I already knew the answer. But in my own punch-drunk state, it was the smartest comment that jumped to my lips. Matt yelled "go ahead" (pronounced *let me die my own miserable solitary death*). And I did.

As I passed, I felt an undeniable wave of sadness. A wave of "everything you set out to do today will be left undone." I had hoped to earn that Boston qualifier; that was no longer a possibility, now that my pace had slowed to a good 30-60 seconds per mile slower than what I needed. Matt and I had also planned to run a strong race, hopefully running together the entire distance; with five miles remaining, that plan had also found its way into the garbage.

Remember, Daddy's in a white shirt.

The official score: Cleveland Marathon 1, John 0. I was physically, mentally, and spiritually crushed.

May 20, 2007, 9:50 AM
Cleveland, OH (Mile 23, North Marginal Drive, by East Ninth Street)

I don't believe in dying
There's no such luck
(Porno for Pyros, "Hard Charger")

Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.

That's life at Mile 23 of a marathon. Every step hurts. Everybody around you hurts as well. The only questions are (a) how much and (b) are they showing it. (The other question is (c) why in the world did running 26.2 miles sound like a good idea; alas, the time to answer that question sensibly has long since passed.)

We run down North Marginal Road, along Cleveland's lakefront. We run next to Lake Erie. We run by Burke Lakefront Airport. We run by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Gr

eat Lakes Science Center
. I know this only because I am a resident of Cleveland and know these landmarks. I am running in downtown Cleveland, but it could be downtown Manhattan, or downtown Baghdad, or the dark side of the flipping moon.

The only thing I did notice, and had noticed for some time, was the twenty-something woman running alongside me. I had noticed her maybe fifteen miles earlier, back when we were running 7:20s with ease. She must have hit her own wall at the same time that I hit mine, because she was now struggling to run eight-plus minute miles herself.

For the past couple of miles, Mystery Woman and I had been playing a cat-and-mouse game. She'd pull ahead of me, then slow down; I'd pull ahead of her; then moments later, she would be passing me again. I decided that I was not going to let her get more than a few steps ahead of me. (It was the most optimistic goal I could muster.) Near the Rock Hall, she was joined for a minute by a couple of her friends; we were all running side-by-side for those steps. (*That's right. I can't remember a single other detail of running along the lakefront for five miles; but put three cute girls within my sight, and I become* Rain Man *.)*

During those miles, ever since I had

passed Matt, I had been doing a lot of thinking about my goals. It came down to one question: why was it so damn important to qualify for Boston? The race itself is a pain - a Monday-afternoon race in an expensive city with most downtown hotels requiring three-night minimums. But that's just the sour grapes talking. I realized that *without somebody to share the experience, the experience would mean nothing* . And even if I qualified today, I'd be going alone. My wife ... suddenly on the road to becoming my ex-wife ... would not be there. My kids would not be there. (*Daddy would be in a white shirt, regardless of what color he was actually wearing.)* And Matt, somewhere behind me on North Marginal Road (not that he was trying to qualify anyway), would not be there.

No man is an island. (Though as the saying goes, some make very good peninsulas.) Were I to qualify for Boston, and run it the following spring, I'd be going as an island. The questions flooded my mind. What would be the point in going alone? Why be lonely and away from the children for several days? Why pay for the privilege of being miserable? Who invented liquid soap, and why?

In some psychological, "there are no accidents" way of thinking, maybe my brain slowed my legs down. I am willing to believe it ... even though running the first 18 miles a bit too fast did not help matters any. I finished Mile 23 in 8:26; for the first time, my overall pace was slower than what I needed to qualify. I no longer cared.

May 20, 2007, 10:00 AM Cleveland, OH (Mile 24, West Third Street/Cleveland Browns Stadium)

When the mountain is high
Just look up to the sky
Ask God to teach you
Then persevere with a smile
(Lenny Kravitz, "Dig In")

The hill up West Third Street from the lakefront is a well-known road of heartbreak for any Cleveland sports fan. Leading uphill from Cleveland Browns Stadium (which itself is on the site of the old Cleveland Municipal Stadium, the former home to the

Browns and baseball's Cleveland Indians), the street has seen any number of pained uphill Cleveland sports-related marches.

As of Mile 24, that number has been increased by two. Mystery Woman and I slogged up the hill together, continuing to encourage each other ("we're gonna make it!" "almost to the top!"). After what seems like hours, we finally make it, and cross the Mile 24 marker. (In reality, it took 8:56 - the slowest mile of the day.) *We're almost there. Just two more to go.*

May 20, 2007, 10:05 AM

Cleveland, OH (Mile 25, Lakeside Avenue)

There are no atheists at mile 25.

(William Simpson)

In a cruel twist of course design, the last mile of the Cleveland Marathon heads east on Lakeside Avenue, then turns south for a couple of blocks, then heads west on St. Clair to the finish line at the Galleria. Why is it "cruel"? Because when you are at the corner of Lakeside and East 12th, you can see the finish line off to your right, just a couple of blocks away ... and you can

hear the announcer yelling the names of incoming finishers, and the finish-line crowd cheering them in ... yet you still have the better part of a mile to run before you get there.

I cross Mile 25 in 8:43, for a running (*this piece is 20 pages long and counting; one pun isn't going to kill anybody*) total of 3:10:10. Still within range of 3:20, but it is going to take some effort. Still keeping close to Mystery Woman, although she has pulled a few steps ahead of me.

Still keeping one step ahead of all

the thoughts that want to take over my mind.

May 20, 2007, 10:15 AM
Cleveland, OH (Finish Line, St. Clair Avenue and East 12th Street, by the Galleria)

I've had to overcome a lot of diversity.

(Drew Gooden, NBA basketball player)

The last turn of the course, from East 18th Street onto St. Clair Avenue, is the best part of the course. The finish line is within reach - you can see it just ahead. After more than three hours of running, the goal is finally within view. I can't quite touch it yet, but it's there.

As the blocks roll by, the crowds become larger, and the noise practically carries you. Even if you are spent, you cannot help but pick up the pace (I completed Mile 26 in 8:18, the fastest of the last few miles) and carry through to

the finish with whatever you have left.

As I approached the finish, I could see that the large clock had already passed 3:20:00. *So much for that goal*
. But with a little push, I could still beat last year's time, even if by seconds ... so I started running a bit harder ... the crowds cheering ... P.A. Guy announcing the imminent arrival of "John Hart from Strongsville" ... still a few seconds to go ... one last burst of

speed, or whatever passed for "speed" after 26.2 miles ...

... and it was over. I finished in 3:20:09. Fourteen seconds faster than last year. A little more than four minutes slower than the time I No Longer Cared About. A few seconds later, Mystery Woman finished (I must have passed her for good in the home stretch; I honestly do not remember). I thanked her for helping to pull me through in those final miles; she did the same;

we shared a hug; I discovered her name is actually Megan, not Mystery Woman. And then she wandered off. Another Marathon Buddy. One of those people whom you've never met before, and likely will never see again ... but who, for a half-hour, was with you in the foxhole. Every race seems to have at least one.

I sat down on one of the folding chairs they provide for the just-finished and waited for Matt. He finished a few minutes later,

obviously disappointed by the experience, but not crushed. We'll both be back some day. Until then ... time to get our money's worth from the food at the finish line. (The junkier, the better. It's time for potato chips, Twinkies, and those cheese puffs that leave the frighteningly orange residue on your fingers. A good rule is that if "cheese" is spelled with a "Z" on the packaging, it ain't cheese).

We lingered around the finish

line for a while, meeting up with Matt's wife and two small children. *Go Daddy Go!*
Then Matt and his family left ... and I hobbled back to my car.

Epilogue

June 6, 2007, 8:00 PM

Borders, Strongsville, OH

The unknown future rolls toward us. I face it ... with a sense of hope.

(Linda Hamilton, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*)

Only after disaster can we be resurrected.

(Brad Pitt, *Fight Club*)

It is now almost three weeks since the marathon. Three weeks since the crash-n-burn along Lake Erie. Three weeks since I started trying to rationalize another so-close, yet-so-far effort. Three weeks further into a divorce. I have a new address, new furniture, new visitation schedule with the kids.

Have I learned anything from

the experience? I think so.

Most of life ... and most of the part of life that is worth living ... is beyond our control. I can determine how often I will run, or how hard I will train ... but it does not guarantee that I will run that fast when race day rolls around. I can control how good of a husband I can be ... but I cannot guarantee that it'll be enough to keep my wife around. That realization is scary ... but it is also liberating. I cannot be sure that anything I do will

ultimately get me to where I want to go. All I can do is all I can do ... and if that effort leaves me somewhere other than where I had originally hoped to be, then I will turn that new place into my destination.

I know it's prosaic, but the journey is better than the destination. The thousand or so miles that I ran to train for the race were more important than the 26.2 miles I ran on race day.

I recognize now that *Remember , Daddy's in a white shirt* does not have to be a symbol of pain. I may have had visions for the future with my family, and some of those exact visions may have died with the divorce. But they can be replaced with new dreams, new hopes for the future.

I am standing in the ocean holding a board. A wave is about to crash around me. It is my choice to try beating the wave back with my board, or to hop on the board and ride with the wave, using the wave's power to guide me to a new place.

Finally, I have learned that whether my running takes me to Boston or not is irrelevant. If I get there some day, and if I get to share the experience with family and/or friends, then terrific. I am sure I will have a great time. If I don't make it ... or if my "reward" would be a race by myself, where I cross the finish line and head back silently to my own hotel room ... then I'll be content with not having the experience.

It is good to have goals. It is better to challenge those goals, and to change them if they no longer match your life.

And now it's time to stop writing. There's not much daylight left, and I want to get in a run.