Hands down, this is another must read column and one of the better pieces we've run on this site. 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 year. 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 his story, at least Part I of it. Parts II and III will run Thursday and Saturday mornings. A great, great read.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Maybe five percent of the American adult population has run a marathon; most of the remaining 95 percent wonder what exactly it is that make those five percent run. I wanted to try to answer that question, and to give some idea of what goes through a runner's mind during a race (specifically, last month's Cleveland Marathon).

A few comments:

1. *This article is very, very long. (That's why we're running it in segments.)*
2. *This article uses the words "I", "me", or "my" far more often than it should. If it comes off as some kind of ego trip … that was not the intention, despite appearances.*
3. *This article is quite different from the usual sports writing you'll see here on*

TheClevelandFan.com. Thanks to Rich for running it.

Enjoy.

May 20, 2007, 6:55 AM

Cleveland, OH (Marathon Start, St. Clair Avenue and East 13th Street)

Others have seen what is and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked why not.

(Pablo Picasso)

I am standing at the starting line of the 30th annual Cleveland Marathon, and I am nervous. A good nervous, I think, but nervous nonetheless.

Part of that nervousness is good old pre-race jitters. Those feelings have nothing to do with novelty or newness – I have run probably fifty or so races since I started running seven years ago. Not once have I started a race without at least a few butterflies flitting through my innards. It does not matter if it is a 40,000-runner mega-marathon or a tiny local race – when everybody lines up, and the (usually figurative) gun is about to go off, my nerves are on fire. *Did I train hard enough?*

Am I ready to run today? Can I run as fast as I think I can? Why didn't I hit the bathroom one more time before the start?

Understand, I am not any kind of top athlete. By day, I work for a local computer software company. That's what I do; that's what I like to do; that's what pays the bills. But I also have a passion for running. A passion for running fast (at least by my own modest standards). A passion for doing the best that I can, for going as long and as hard as my unspectacular legs and lungs will carry me.

As I waited for the start, I pondered the road ahead. Let's not kid ourselves – running a marathon (which measures out as 26 miles, 385 yards) is not easy. The distance certainly has historical origins -- Pheidippides, the Greek courier who ran from the Greek town of Marathon to the capital of Athens to convey the news that the Greeks had won the eponymously named battle. However, the marathon has become a popular event in modern times precisely because it tests you. It is a distance that is designed to break you down. (Pheidippides collapsed and died on the spot after completing the distance.) It forces you to find reserves that you never knew you had. And no matter what training has come before, there is always that flash of doubt, that sense of *what in the hell am I doing?* that inevitably flashes through my mind moments before the start. I have learned not to fight this feeling – I let it in for a moment, accept it, then put it aside.

The final reason why I was nervous was that this would be my latest attempt to qualify for Boston. The Boston Marathon is the granddaddy of marathons, the oldest continuous race in the United States. It is also the

most prestigious. The reason? It is the only major marathon in which the door is not open to all. An entry form and a check are not enough to get you to the start line. In order to run Boston, you must first qualify for Boston. There are three ways to do so. One is to be lucky enough to be an elite athlete or a celebrity (such as when comedian Will Ferrell ran Boston a few years ago) – the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) reserves the right to invite whoever it wants. The second way is to participate in one of the BAA's laudable charity programs. These runners register to run for one of the race-recognized charities (sorry, George Costanza, The Human Fund need not apply), raise a specified amount of funds, and then get their race bib.

The other way to qualify for Boston is to

run another marathon in a specified time. That's how most runners get their ticket to Boston. That's what most runners consider "qualifying for Boston" to be. That's why I was here. The standards are not easy. As a 37 year old man, I would need to run a time of 3:15:59 or less (the time is nominally "3:15," but the BAA tacks on the extra 59 seconds as a sop to those of us who need it). That's 26.2 miles at an average of 7:28 per mile, or just over eight miles per hour.

Why is it so important to qualify for Boston? We have to go back a bit to answer that question…

April 28, 2002, 12:24 PM

Cleveland, OH (Euclid Avenue, by East 18th Street)

Not here. Not like this.

As I finished my first marathon (the 2002 CVS Cleveland Marathon; note the different sponsor!), I felt waves of emotions rolling through me.

Joy, at running farther than I ever had before. Relief, at the race finally being over, close to four and a half hours since the clock started. (That time broke down as roughly one hour of fun and three and a half hours of agony.) Exhaustion. Pride.

And disappointment. *Congratulations, John! You've just run The Dumbest Race Of All Time!*

I knew –

knew

– that I was capable of much more. I ran the opening miles way too fast –

the cardinal sin of marathoning, a real rookie mistake – and had paid the price. I felt good – excellent, actually – at the start, and took off at a pace a good 60 to 90 seconds per mile faster than I had any business attempting.

Most marathon training plans (including the one I had used) schedule two to three weeks of tapering before race day. You cut your mileage substantially, letting your body recover and adapt to your training, and make sure that your

tanks are fully topped off for race day. The danger is that tapering leaves you feeling extra strong. That, plus the adrenaline rush of racing with hundreds (or thousands) of other people, can cause you to jackrabbit from the starting line. The first miles tick by, and you think to yourself, *I really CAN run this fast!* Unfortunately, the seconds that you speed up in the first hour usually result in you giving back minutes in the final miles.

That's exactly what happened to

me in that first race. My super-secret goal was to break four hours. That's about 9:10 per mile. How fast did I go out? *A good minute per mile faster than that*. It's so seductive, that siren call of the fast miles. *Come on, John. You CAN go faster. See how easy it is?*

And it was, for about ten miles. By the halfway point (13.1 miles), I was cooked. A mile or so later, I started walking. The final 12 miles were a combination of running and walking (mostly the latter). I tried to play mental games with myself. *Just run to that stoplight*, I would tell myself, gazing at a light

that was maybe two-tenths of a mile in the distance. I'd run halfway there ("run" being a relative term; I was doing the "survival shuffle" all too familiar to many marathoners in the later miles, when you are barely picking your feet off the ground). Then my calves or quads or whatever other muscle group had decided to mutiny would howl, and I'd slow to a walk for a couple of minutes. Lather, rinse, and repeat that process for two and a half hours, and you have the second half of my debut marathon.

When I finally crossed the finish line, I felt waves of emotion. Joy, at having completed what I had set out to do. Relief, in that I was finally going to give my throbbing muscles their long-deserved break. Pain, in a very physical sense (I would call off work the next day; it would be three days before I was walking normally).

But most of all, I felt disappointment. Not because I had missed my goal time of four hours (after clocking the first half in 1:50, my 2:33 second half placed me at 4:23

overall). Not because I had failed to jump over some other mental hurdle I had consecrated in my mind. No, this disappointment was from a sense that *I could have done much, much better*. I could have prepared better, and I could have raced much smarter.

In a perverse way, crash-n-burning that first race was the best thing that could have happened, from the perspective of making me a runner. Had I run that first race in 3:59, I may have hung up my shoes

then. It's like the occasional dog at the track that actually catches the little rabbit; he is ruined as a racer forever. By running such a poor race (not necessarily by the clock; rather, by measuring the gulf between *w hat I could have done*
and
what I actually did
), I felt like that rabbit was ahead of me, out of reach for right now, but maybe attainable if I would just try a little harder.

October 13, 2002, 11:57 AM

Chicago, IL (Grant Park)

Only those who risk going too far can possibly know how far they can go.

(T.S. Eliot)

When does a dream become a dream? Is there a tipping point, an identifiable moment in time when your brain becomes fixated on achieving some goal and your body on carrying it out? And how do we pick our dreams, anyway? Do we find them … or do they find us?

Six months after my first marathon, I found myself in Grant Park in Chicago on a clear but blustery morning, continuing to chase an as-yet-unspecified dream. The running bug had bitten deep; I knew

that I wanted to run more races. Within a week of finishing Cleveland, I was searching for another marathon to do. I stumbled upon the Chicago Marathon, one of the largest marathons in the land. (That year, they capped the race at 35,000 runners; that cap has since been raised to its present limit of 45,000 for the 2007 edition.) Being part of a mega-race sounded good. Being part of a mega-race in Chicago, one of the world's most fun cities, sounded even better. And as Chicago was one of my wife's favorite cities as well, I had no trouble proposing a weekend getaway to the Second City.

Somewhere in those six months, I had found my way to an Internet message board dedicated to marathoning. As with any new group, it took me time to immerse myself in the new language. *Intervals* … *tempo runs* … *fartleks* (yes, that word still makes me inwardly giggle like a sixth grader) … *IT band* … plenty of new phrases (or old ones with new meanings) made their way into my vocabulary.

One of those phrases (abbreviations, actually) was *BQ*. I would see others write missives like *I'm really looking to BQ at Chicago* or *I need to run five minutes faster than my last race to BQ*, and I would wonder what they meant. *BQ, BQ, BQ.* What did it mean?, I wondered. I finally asked, and was told that *BQ* stands for Boston Qualifying time. I quickly learned that running a time that qualifies you to run Boston – whether or not you actually decide to run Boston (although most who

qualify do run it at some point) – was a sort of honor in the running community, a way of demonstrating your ability.

At that point, I had no business of trying to qualify for Boston. Although a summer of diligent training had helped me run faster (I ran a 1:43 half-marathon a few weeks before Chicago), I knew I was far away from the 3:10:59 that I would need to qualify. But Boston had become one of those sputtering fluorescent bulbs, and I was one of those moths that

would keep flying toward it.

I ran Chicago in 3:53:10, a solid half-hour faster than my Cleveland time six months prior. Once again, I ran too fast in the first half (1:47), and paid for it in the second half (2:06), but at least the disparity was not *quite* as huge. I still remember the carnival atmosphere of the day. The crush of a couple hundred thousand people in Grant Park (the location of the start and finish). The streets lined with spectators (it's estimated that up to a

million people line Chicago's roads to cheer on the runners). The sign at 16 miles telling some guy to "keep running to the hospital, your wife's in labor!" (There are also things I do *not* remember. Around mile 22, the course ran along two sides of U.S. Cellular Field, home of the Chicago White Sox. I know this only from the course map; to this day, I cannot recall running by the stadium, my fatigue was so strong by that point of the race.)

And so continued a quest for that BQ…

May 19, 2007, 6:33 AM

Strongsville, OH (Bonnie Park, Cleveland Metroparks)

Fast forward almost five years.

I continued to train, continued to race, and continued to whittle minutes off my best time. 3:38:32 … then 3:29:19 … then 3:28:57 … then 3:17:10. That last one (my best to date; a mere 71 seconds shy of the qualifying standard, which eased to 3:15:59 once I turned 35) came on a windy day in Clearwater, Florida, at the Florida Gulf Beaches Marathon. That race was the first one in which I had a true chance to get the BQ. I was on pace to qualify through 24 miles, but slowed in the final miles thanks in part to a

20+ mile per hour headwind. (In fairness, that same wind was a tailwind earlier in the race.)

Since that race, about two and a half years ago, I have tried and fallen short time and again. 3:20 … then another 3:20 … then 3:25 … then 3:22 … then 3:18. (The last one occurred on a bitterly cold day at the Last Chance for Boston Marathon in Columbus, a

26-laps-of-one-mile race that is truly designed for runners trying one last time to qualify for that year's Boston; I more or less ran it for fun, and ended up doing very well).

That brings us to now. This year will be the sixth in a row that I have run the Cleveland Marathon. And this year will be The Year, the time

that I get that elusive BQ. (I think.)

The day before a marathon, I like to run maybe three miles, with the first mile at race pace (I want to know what that pace “feels like” coming out of the gate), then a couple of additional miles. It’s not a run that taxes me. It’s not supposed to be. It is simply

a revving of the engine, one last training session before the big day.

After the run (which takes just under 23 minutes and feels as easy as walking), I returned home and glanced through my training log. One of my other day-before-the-race rituals is to reflect on my training of the previous few months. I

especially like to pick out the tougher runs, the ones where I really had to push myself out the door or had to constantly struggle to finish. *If I can make it on a tough day like that, then tomorrow can't be that bad*, is what my thinking seems to be.

February 4, 2007, 9:00 AM

Berea, OH (Wallace Lake, Cleveland Metroparks)

Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no

other route to success.

(Pablo Picasso)

I've been training Confuciously.

(Mike Tyson)

Man, it's cold. The temperature when I left the house was -1 degree. That's minus-one degree Fahrenheit; none of that pansy metric-system-one-degree-below-zero-Celsius-really-means-thirty-degrees garbage. This is

the REAL cold, baby. The kind that finds your bones. The kind where the bitter cold air causes your nostrils to drip, then freezes the snot before you can wipe it away. The kind where most people – and *all* sane people – wake up, weigh their options, and decide to stay inside, snuggling under blankets and curling up by fireplaces.

In other words, it's a perfect day for a 14 mile run.

For whatever reason, I like running outside when running outside is certifiably insane. Living in suburban Cleveland, with its diverse seasons, I get plenty of opportunities to put that insanity on display during the typical year. I have run in hundred-degree temperatures

with matching humidity; I have run in blizzards; I have run through pouring rain. One of my best runs ever was an eight-miler through the remnants of Hurricane Frances in September 2004; I can still remember the bewildered looks on the faces of drivers who passed me by. I will run in any condition except for thunderstorms – the possibility of a lightning-bolt

induced death will send me indoors to the treadmill. Otherwise, it's time to head outside – even when it is frigid.

I parked my car at Wallace Lake in Berea, the origin for the morning's run.

Luckily for me, I was joined that morning by Matt, my running partner and fellow Crazy Running Guy. ("Crazy Running Guy" is a term Matt and I coined to describe runners like us – those who will not let Mother Nature interfere with their daily running fix.) The initial blast of freezing cold hits us as we get out of our cars. We walk to the trail, muscles adapting to the sudden change in

temperature. And then we run.

Spend two hours running with somebody, and you will know more about them than if you had worked next to them for a year. Matt and I have run most of our long runs (the weekly, 14+ mile training jaunts that are the

staple of any marathoner's training) since meeting fortuitously on one of the Metropark trails two years ago. The hundreds of miles we have traversed have been a backdrop to conversations – about our children, our family lives, sports, books, movies, careers, travel, women, history, religion, food, music, and just about anything else that you could imagine. We have shared in each other's

successes, comforted each other when times have been rough, and have done all of it while continuing to put one foot after the other.

We also share the common goal of qualifying for Boston. Matt is seven years younger than I; as such, he has to run the more

demanding 18-34 year old standard of 3:10:59. He has the advantage of being much faster than me, even though he does not completely realize it yet. He has smoked me at every distance except for the marathon, and that one is just a matter of time. I am very familiar with the sight of his back -- almost every time we have raced together, he has finished ahead of me. Unconvinced that he is yet

ready to run a qualifying time (he ran 3:18 at the Towpath Marathon last fall despite suffering a rather disabling side cramp in the final miles), he decided to join me in the quest for 3:15:59 or faster, leaving the BQ attempt for a fall race.

To get to Boston, we need to put in plenty of miles – even when it is below zero, like this day. Other than one or two hardy walkers, we have the entire park to ourselves. There is a strength that comes from running when other people are at home. For me, it is not an egotistical strength; it's not about "look what I can do" or anything like

that. (Despite the number of times the word “I” is used throughout this piece, I – *damn, there it is again* – try to be self-effacing and modest.) I guess I really like my hobbies, and I’ll be damned if I let a little *weather* (pronounced *shit*) get in the way. I’m very lucky to have a friend who

feels the same way.

May 11, 2007, 6:48 PM

Strongsville, OH (home)

I think we should get divorced.

That's not how this Friday evening is supposed to go, I thought. My son Andrew and I had just come inside after playing Wiffle ball on the front lawn. (He's five years old, and he's developing a nice

left-handed swing.) I was thinking that we were going to get cleaned up, have some supper, maybe take a walk with the kids (Andrew and my three-year-old daughter Karina) around the neighborhood.

Annie had other plans. *Can we talk later tonight?*

, she asked. Her voice and face said that This Is Serious.

Why don't you tell me now, I replied. And that is when she hit me with her news. (*Hit* is the correct word; *blind-sided* would be even more

accurate, as I had no idea that she felt this way.) I was so shocked, I almost did not hear her reasons. I cannot really remember what she said – not because I wasn't listening, but because I was too stunned to.

Blah blah blah growing distant blah blah blah never felt a connection to you blah blah blah not sure I've ever

loved you blah blah blah interested in someone else . I knew that some distance had come between us in the past few months, but I never believed that our issues were that severe or beyond repair.

The thought of divorce strikes at my very core for

the same reason that I am a distance runner: I hate to give up. Former Orlando Magic General Manager Pat Williams (also a marathoner and multiple-time Boston finisher) sums up marathoning best: *it's practice at not quitting*. I believe, rightly or wrongly, that I can throw some additional work at most any problem and be

able to solve it. In a marathon, there are going to be times when you want to give up. I have found that the amount of training or the number of prior marathons does not matter much: there will come those times, especially in the final five or six miles of the race, when you have *had it*. Pushing past that feeling

of giving in is difficult, but so liberating. It makes you feel that you really can do anything, that you can push through any pain and break through to the other side.

Unfortunately, that mindset is useless when the other person wants to call it quits. There's no way to

overcome that obstacle. Believe me, I try.

Maybe we can go to counseling

.

Maybe we can separate for a while

.

Let’s not rush into anything

.

No, Annie says. It's over.

And I cry.

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.

Editors note: Part II will run Thursday morning. Part III Saturday morning.