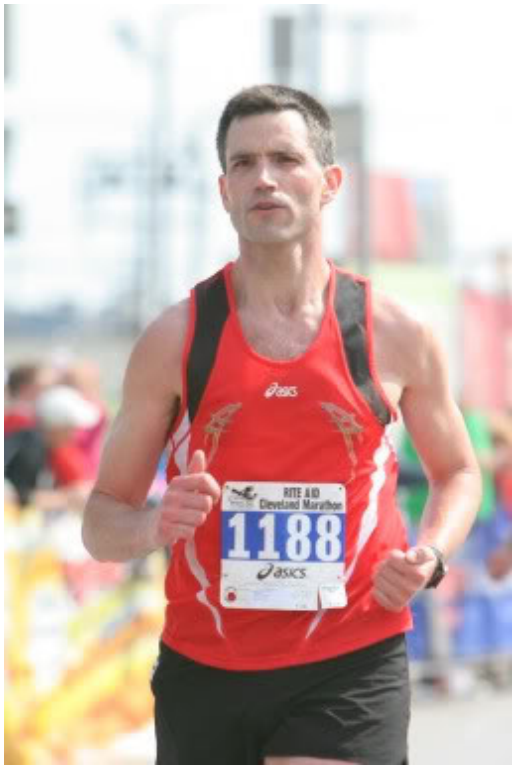
If email responses are any barometer, the first installment (linked inside) of this piece from John Hnat was one of the more popular columns we've run here at The Cleveland Fan in a long time. It's the story of our Cavs beat writer John Hnat, who is also a distance runner trying to qualify for the Boston Marathon ... amid some serious heartbreak in his home life. I'm very pleased to bring you Part II of his journey this morning. The final installment posts Saturday.



Click here for Part I ...

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. *Remember, 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. *Remember, 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 *fa mily* 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. *Y ou'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.