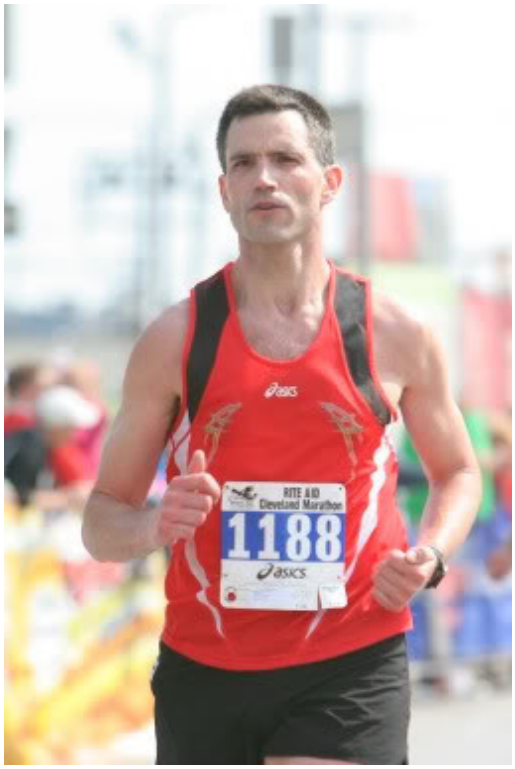
If you've seen the first two parts of this column up on the site this week and have not gotten around to reading them, make some time this weekend. John Hnat (of The Good, The Bad, & The Summary fame) takes us deep inside his mind and heart to chronicle his attempt to qualify for the Boston Marathon amid strife in his family life. This is the final installment of this three part epic ...



Click here for Part I

Click here for Part II

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 Great 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* Ra

in 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 (*thi*

s 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.