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A Harvest of Hope by John "The Penguin" Bingham

Every autumn brings in a new crop of marathoners with big dreams...

The beginning of fall signifies lots of things to lots of people. For baseball fans, the first crisp mornings mean pennant races and the World Series. For football fans, the turning leaves mean tailgate parties and divisional rivalries. For us, as runners, the fall means marathons. I know that not every runner wants to run a marathon. And I know that running a marathon is not the sole definition of what it means to be a runner. But I also this fall in Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York City, a combined total of close to 100,000 marathon participants will toe the starting line. Add in all the other autumn marathons, and it's clear that for many of us fall is defined by peaking, tapering, racing, and recovering.

Of the hundreds of thousands running marathons this season, a large percentage will be first-timers. And for many of those first-time marathoners, it'll be their first race ever, at any distance. Gone are the days when runners gradually progressed up the race-distance ladder. These days, it's buy the shoes, start to run, and begin training for a marathon.

In part, that's because in May or June, when new runners show up for "marathon information" meetings or pick up literature about marathon-training programs, it all sounds like so much fun. The mantra "You can do 26.2" seems to make sense. In an instant, thousands of former couch potatoes envision themselves crissing the finish line.

Of course, come fall, reality rears its ugly head. That's when many of the first-time marathoners I work with start asking themselves, "What was I thinking?" As the big day approaches, and especially at the height of taper madness, they're ready to have themselves committed for ever dreaming they could run a marathon.

What I try to help them see is that the race is not a final exam. The event is instead a celebration. A time to get together with 40,000 of your closest friends and go for a run. It's a time to share your success with others, while they share their success with you. Getting to the finish line is never a given for a marathoner. But anyone who has paid his or her training dues has earned the right to a spot at the starting line.

For all marathoners, but especially the first-timers, the marathon is a harvest of hope. As you start with your first 3-mile "long" run in June, it's hard to imagine that your body is ever going to adapt, but you hope it does. As the long runs get ever longer, and you start to deal with issues of hydration, refuelling, and chafing (my arch nemesis), you just have to hope that the program is working.

You hope you've found the right shoes. You hope you've logged the right number of miles. You hope the sports-nutrition advice you've culled from books and magazine is right. And mostly, you hope your coaches are right. You hope you can do 26.2.

The payoff for me, having completed 36 marathons, isn't so much crossing another finish line. For me, the payoff now is watching you cross the finish line. It's seeing you pound the sky in defiance. It's seeing you burst into tears or laughter when you realize you've done it. It's seeing you standing at the finish line in a state of shock knowing your life has just changed.

So, I'll be out there again this fall. I'll be on the courses running with you, and at the finish line waiting for you. I'll see you at your best and at your worst. I'll listen to your fears, help you with your blisters, or cry with you, if that's what you need. And I won't be alone. Thousands of us - coaches, volunteers, race organizers, and spectators - will be there cheering you on.



And when winter finally comes, you'll be able to look at your marathon medal and know that this season was the best season of your life.

Waddle on, friends.