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Cheers To You by Rob Vogt, edited by Cristina Negrón (article appeared in Runner's World Dec '94)
A bit of advice for well-intentioned marathon spectators...

I know they mean well, those countless spectators who line the streets of major marathons. After all, dear reader, they are your friends and family. They cheer and shout, not just for you but even for strangers like me. And thank goodness they do, because my own family would rather clean out their belly buttons with sandpaper than watch me run.

So it's not that I don't appreciate spectators' enthusiasm. I do. Really. But now that I've finished my second marathon and heard the same tired phrases for a total of 7 hours, 25 minutes and 33 seconds, I'd like to humbly offer your loved ones a bit of advice. If you would, share my words with them before your next marathon.

Dear Marathon Spectator,
Please do not yell the following:

1. "It's all downhill from here."

I have heard this phrase 516 times during my two-year running career. I am not sure how many times it has been true, but I would guess approximately zero. It usually evokes hearty chuckles from your fellow spectators, which might improve your self-esteem. Most runners, however, will vow to come back and cut out your spleen with a butter knife, which will not improve your immune system.

2. "Only (insert random amount here) miles to go."

While this is not a hard thought to swallow for those of you covering these (insert random amount here) miles in your air-conditioned Winnebago, it's another thing entirely to us marathoners. Especially in the last half of the race, when we're moving about as fast as Frankenstein on showshoes.

Secondly, runners often employ the practice of "dissociating" from the pain we're enduring. In other words, most of us, in order to forget that we still have (insert random amount here) miles to go, instead imagine that we can see broasted prok chops floating in the air singing "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing." It's a beautiful fantasy, until it's shattered by a spectator who yells, "Only 11 miles to go!"

3. "You look great!"

As cognitively misguided as most distance runners are, we realize that we do *not* look great. Our clothes are sweaty, our hair is matted, and our skin has more salt crusts than a jumbo margarita.

Besides, telling us that we look great implies that we should feel great. We usually do, for the first 5 miles or so. But by the 20-mile mark, most of us are wondering (1) why our quadriceps feel like liquefied corned beef hash and (2) how come there are so many Elvis impersonators roller-skating through water stations chanting, "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." Once again, we are dissociating, until some well-meaning spectator shouts, "You look great!"

So now that I've ruled out perhaps the three favorite cheers of marathon spectators, the question becomes obvious: What should you yell when runners stagger pathetically by?

The answer: Nothing! Just clap your hands as loudly as you can and make generic cheering noises like "Whooooo!" or "Yaaaaaaay!" We runners are suckers for applause.



Why is that? Well, most runners were never star athletes in high school or college. So, even though we say that we train for marathons to lose weight, to relieve stress, to improve our self-image or to escape our neurotic families (a purely hypothetical example...), that's only partially true. The real reason why we lumber through 26.2 miles of hell is for the remote chance that we might receive as much heartfelt applause as the 1,134th finisher on the PGA money list last year.

See you at the races.

Rob Vogt is a 3:43 marathoner from Western Springs, Illinois.