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Marathon Muse by Doug Erickson, edited by Cristina Negrón (article appeared in Runner's World Nov '92)
Sometimes there's too much time to think on a 26.2-mile run...

One of the first things you learn about the marathon is that telling people you're going to run one is often vastly more fun than actually doing it.

I learned that last fall when I ran my first marathon - Twin Cities - described as "The Most Beautiful Urban Marathon in America." I wouldn't know. I was too busy looking for the next mile marker. Herewith a summary:

The starting line:

I smile coolly at the other runners, bravely suppressing a very real desire to curl into the fetal position and bawl like a baby. The fear of the unknown lurks. Will I be nonchalantly sipping Gatorade at the finish line in a few hours or babbling incoherently on some stranger's lawn? An ominous sign: I have a Debbie Gibson tune stuck in my head.

Mile 1:

People are flying by me, but they're way out of my league. I take a small amount of comfort in the fact that a lot of good marathon runners look a bit on the malnourished side, like they just broke free from an IV pole. Not the kind of people you'd want on your tug-of-war team.

Mile 5:

No problem. A walk in the park.

Mile 10:

Okay, a walk in a really, really big park.

Mile 13:

The halfway point. About 2 hours left or four episodes of "Cheers". I tell myself I don't have to run for six weeks after this is over.

Mile 15:

Severe boredom sets in. Just for fun, I tally the total number of hours I spent training for this run. Bad idea. People have cured major illnesses in less time.

Mile 17:

I tell myself I don't have to run for six months after this is over.

Mile 19:

I spot my family. Despite the fact that he's wearing cowboy boots, my dad joins me for a few yards and asks me how I'm doing. In a total state of denial, I shrug and say "fine."

Mile 21:

Lots of people are passing me now - old people, young people, fat people. I've turned into quite the equal-opportunity loser.



Mile 22:

My legs conclude that they are done running, so I'm now traveling on what feels like telephone poles wearing combat boots. I tell myself I never have to run again, ever, after this is over.

Mile 23:

I begin to question the wisdom of marathoning. You have to wonder about a sport whose participants, when asked why they do it, usually say something like, "I guess I'm just nuts." This may be a fine justification for opening fire in a shopping mall, but for choosing a pastime?

Mile 25:

My mind is playing tricks on me. I see a port-o-mirage.

Mile 26.2:

Throng of people line the curbs, all surprisingly willing to overlook the fact that thousands of people have finished in front of me. While they're not actually chanting my name, they applaud wildly. I do finish, after all (in 4:14). We won't mention the winner's time. Suffice to say that he had time to shower, eat lunch and read a James Michener novel by the time I shuffled in.

I don't remember much of the rest of the day, other than I took a nap and woke up to find I had the flexibility of plywood. The next day, the toenail on my big toe turned black and fell off.

Since then, I've spent some time reviewing the experience. I know I'll always enjoy running, and I'll always admire marathoners. I'm not sure I'll ever trot among them again.

Then again, maybe if I just trained a little harder...

Doug Erickson is a Minneapolis newspaper editor. He decided to run a second marathon as soon as the pain of the first one dulled.