



OFF CALL / DÉTENTE

DESTINATION

Line-ups and marathon highs

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It was Nov. 2, 2002, and I had finally arrived in New York City to run my first marathon, after months of gruelling training in Iqaluit, Nunavut, where I work as a family doctor. For 6 months I ran in sub-zero temperatures, on slippery gravel paths covered in ice and snow, often in 30 to 40 km/h winds. For 6 months, I juggled my call schedule to incorporate 4-hour-long runs, got up 3 hours before 8 am hospital rounds to run before work (and was sometimes late for rounds as a result!). For 6 months, I covered the same few kilometers (dusty in the summer, icy in the fall) of Iqaluit road over and over in order to accumulate the necessary mileage. Now I was finally in the Greatest City on the continent, to run with 32 000 others, many of whom had, like myself, been picked to run via lottery.

I arrived in NYC on the day prior to the race, after 5 hours of flying — thankfully no blizzard delays on the Iqaluit end! I had to hurry down to the Marathon Expo to pick up my registration package, number (for pinning to my shirt) and electronic chip (to record starting and finishing times). When I arrived at the Expo, my heart sank as I joined the longest line-up of my entire life — thousands of people were lined up, in a column that snaked down 11th Avenue and around the corner down 34th Street. But the line at least moved briskly, and thanks to the expert crowd management skills of the Manhattan volunteers, I was inside the building within the half hour.

Everywhere the marathon hype was mounting. Huge billboards outside sported slick Nike ads (NYC — land of the slick Nike advertisement) showing a

sweaty marathoner's steely gaze and the caption "The lottery got me in, and guts will get me out." Inside, one could buy t-shirts with "26.2 miles" on the front, and "...and I still love New York" on the back; or signposts with "To Hell and Back — 26.2 miles ahead." Booths selling every possible runner's accessory abounded, and people from all over the world were there, either to run themselves, or to promote their own marathons, in locales as exotic as Bhutan, Negril, Jamaica and Norway. Foreign languages could be heard at every turn — German, French, Italian. As our official marathon guide states, there were athletes from 96 different countries here (but only one family doc from the Arctic, I reckoned!)

The day of the marathon, I rose at the ungodly hour of 5 am to don my runners, with electronic chip attached. With tote bag in hand, I descended to the depths of the century-old subway system to catch a train to midtown Manhattan, to meet the official buses that would sweep me off to the starting line on Staten Island. I had just missed a train, and as I numbly waited for the next, more runners emerged, one by one, out of the chill pre-dawn, each with the running shoes sporting the telltale electronic chip. Still foggy with sleep, we solemnly nodded to each other, and resumed waiting for our downtown-bound train. When it finally arrived at our platform, we saw that it was already populated by other marathoners. At each stop, we took on more — runners of all different shapes, ages, gender and race.

At Times Square, we piled out in a sea of running tights, with toques and thin gloves donned against the chill

November air. On the street outside, we coalesced into a pulsing artery of humanity, streaming toward the New York Public Library, where buses waited to transport us to the starting line. Thirty thousand people were corralled expertly by police and volunteers into a huge line, snaking back and forth along 42nd Street. My heart surged to see them all, and to hear the police and volunteers shout words of encouragement to us.

A half hour ride by bus saw us deposited at Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, at the far side of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. It was 8:00 am, and we

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had 3 hours to kill before starting. There were volunteers handing out bagels, water, Gatorade, yogurt and coffee, and entertainers warming up the crowd. I had a quick breakfast, though declined to take part in the most patient line I'd ever seen — the thousands of people lined up solemnly for their morning coffee. Now that's an addiction! Instead, I curled up on the grass in a sunny spot to try to catch some ZZZs. A couple of hours later, I rose to stand in the slowest line of my life — 50 minutes to the front of the Porto-Potty line. Then suddenly, people were moving to their colour-coded corrals for the staggered start-off. I had been assigned to the second of 3 starts. After a beautiful rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner, the gun went off, and I watched the first 10 000 runners bound across the bridge to the strains of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," with the rest of us whooping and yelling encouragement. Here we all were, finally, after months of gruelling training. This was our long-awaited moment.

Of course, the elite runners started at the front of the pack, and quickly outstripped the rest of us average folk. The lead runner, a Kenyan named Rodgers Rop, would win the 26.2-mile race with the

unbelievable time of 2 hours 8 minutes 7 seconds. The top woman, another Kenyan, won with a time of 2 hours 25 minutes 56 seconds. They were crossing the finish line just as many of us were hitting our stride at mid-course.

We were ecstatic to be finally running. There were enthusiastic crowds lining the streets the whole way, and great volunteers who handed off water and Gatorade every mile or two. There was nothing to compare with the feeling of racing along in this sea of humanity, with these usually hardened New Yorkers (who typically do not give out encouragement for free) cheering us on with the greatest enthusiasm and fervour. The crowds oriented us to each borough along the way, shouting proudly "You're in Brooklyn," or "Welcome to the Bronx, people," as we passed from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Live bands had set up along the course, and welcomed us with boisterous brass band tunes, or a chorus of bagpipes, or the harsh strains of a young punk band, or the rhythm of rap music, or an elementary school's orchestral efforts. Small kids held out their hands to "high five" the athletes. Spectators, young and old, picked out the names written on the t-shirts of individual racers to personalize their encouragement: "Way to go, Jason!," "looking good, Leslie," "keep going Jeff, you're almost there." I even got a "Way to go, Nunavut!" from one 12-year old boy who picked out the name on my shirt (maybe he thought it was my name). I was grinning like a fool the whole way and grinned even wider at that.

The race was moving at a good pace. At the half-marathon mark, I realized that I didn't really feel that tired. Training in the Arctic, I decided, must be like training at altitude — it had hardened me. After the challenge of snow, ice, sub-zero temperatures, 40-kilometre-per-hour winds, threats of polar bears, the uneven footing of the Arctic tundra, this run on paved roads at a balmy 8°C (no wind chill), blue skies and cheering crowds seemed like a dream.

I decided to speed up as I crossed the electronic mats at 10 k, half-marathon, and 20 miles, accelerating from an 11-minute mile to a 10-minute mile to a 9-minute mile. In the last 4 miles, I knew I was going to make it, and I started sprinting in an effort to shave a few more seconds off my time. With a whoop of triumph, I crossed the finish line with a net time of 4 hours 5 minutes 6 seconds. I ranked 12 647 out of 35 185 and 2476 out of 10 208 women — a respectable ranking, I thought, for a little family doc from the North!