

Kingwood Marathon
01/01/12
New Year's Morning 8:00 a.m.
David Jones

The tradition is to look forward with hope. More specifically, we commit to resolutions that will result in a better self. However, upon waking the morning of January 2nd, it's equally customary to forget about all that nonsense pledged in a drunken stupor at 11:52 p.m. on New Year's Eve. The vast majority of us accept that our only real resolution is to make it through another day.

Perhaps our ephemeral commitment is a consequence of only looking forward and not sufficiently looking back. Before setting any 2012 goals, I decided to contemplate the previous year and assess how I spent the majority of my effort and time.



After several minutes of pensive reflection, all of 2011 was just a blur. There wasn't a single trace revealing how I spent the majority of the year.

Therefore, I concluded that I had 36 hours at most to attempt a resolution, or wait another year before deluding myself into believing, "This time I mean it." My resolution?—to run a sub 3:10 marathon. On nine previous attempts over a three-year span, I've come up short.

Fortunately, the New Year's Day Kingwood Marathon provided an opportunity. The genesis of this marathon itself was a result of another resolution: to set a world record. Rick Worley was in the process of setting the Guinness Record for the most marathons on consecutive weekends (200 marathons on 159 consecutive weekends for three years). The streak was in jeopardy when there wasn't a marathon anywhere in the U.S. for the first weekend of January in 1999. Texas running legend Steve Boone (500+ marathons) answered the call and hastily organized this New Year's Day race.

To keep the cost reasonable, they designed the course as four laps on the concrete greenbelt trails through the Kingwood suburb's pine forest park. The inaugural event had 20 marathoners. However, not wanting to jeopardize the world record, the race sponsor had the course USATF certified, and it's a Boston qualifier. The race's popularity has grown every year, and the organizers now limit entry to 650 runners; the event usually sells out eight months in advance.

A disadvantage of a looped course is the runner congestion that occurs when the faster runners begin to lap the field in the third and fourth laps. It's worse when walking half-marathoners are participating; my running

mate Guillaume described them succinctly: "They're a plague." However, the congestion's inconvenience is more than offset by the mental advantage a multi-looped course provides. As Y. Berra said, "[It's] 90 percent mental; the other half is physical."

With a single-loop course, I mentally split the race into miles—twenty-six individual points to not only check (worry about) pace, but also the distance remaining: *Five seconds behind pace at mile four. Too fast that mile . . . easy back about eight seconds this mile. Three more miles to make up 15 seconds.*

I find a four-loop course perfect: *Go out steady the first lap. Hold the pace this lap. Pick it up this loop. This is it—one last lap.*

As far as the variables in my control—conditioning and weight—I was in good but not optimal form. During the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday period, I reclaimed about four pounds of body weight—okay, okay—fat. But I was still the same weight as when I posted my 2010 personal record.

Additionally, I certainly wasn't undertrained, just the opposite. By accident, I logged a 77-mile week just a fortnight earlier. My schedule only called for 55 easy miles; however, in my attempt to offset several hedonistic Christmas cookie / pumpkin pie-eating binges, I added extra miles by doing daily doubles. Without realizing it, I logged the most weekly miles of this cycle when I was actually scheduled to taper.

The only remaining factor was the weather, and it was perfect; it was perfect every single day of the week and the afternoon of the race, just not the morning I would be actually running. Here are the forecast morning temperatures five days pre-race:

Wednesday: 42 degrees
Thursday: 42 degrees
Friday: 48 degrees
Saturday: 58 degrees
Sunday (race day): 62 degrees
Monday: 38 degrees

The forecast low for Sunday morning was 62 degrees with a south wind. Since the race had a late start time, 8:00 a.m., that was going to be awful weather to attempt a PR. However, the forecast high race day was only 68 degrees because a cold front would blow through about noon.

Oh, that was cruel, so cruel that it seemed not merely due to the caprice of nature, but the scorn from a higher power. The day before the race, I sent a text lamenting my poor weather luck to my longtime friend and running buddy John. He replied with a single strange acronym: "STHUAJR!" After five minutes, I deciphered his reply: "*Shut The Hell Up And Just Run!*"

In spite of John's "tough love," my weeklong supplication was answered race morning...well, partially. As I stood at the park pavilion, it was a warm 57 degrees with a cloudless sky, but the wind was already out of the north. Dehydration was still a threat once the sun rose above the tall East Texas pine trees, but at least I would be able to breathe comfortably in the lower humidity and surely pass the halfway mark on pace.

As we entered the starting chute, there was only one thing that might prevent me from running a sub 3:10 this day; I wasn't going to try. My ultimate goal is not to run a sub 3:10, but a sub 3:00 marathon, 3:10 is just a stepping stone. As any serious marathoner will confirm, 3:10 is a long, long way from 3:00. I wasn't ready for a sub 3:00, but I believed 3:05 was a possibility. The marathon spirit is not to attempt what you think you can do, but to attempt what you believe is just beyond your potential.

The starter called us up to the line. The event had no corporate-sponsored pacers, so I tried to form my own. Standing at the front, right on the line, I turned and called out, "3:05? Anyone shooting for 3:05, or even 3:00?" There wasn't a single reply. "How about 3:10? Anyone going for 3:10?" A single runner tilted his head from side to side and replied, "Uhh...well, maybe."

The starter interrupted, "Okay. I'm going to say, 'On your mark,' then sound the horn." "Okay—on your mark," and we were off.

I went out with a brisk stride that felt light. For the first 100 yards I was running in the lead—in *first place*. However, I was sure somewhere in the pack there were at least a couple of sub 3:00 marathoners who

would soon overtake me. Last year, there were seven sub 3:00 finishers. I reached the first mile still in the lead with the next-closest runner about 30 yards back. *No way! Can I really have a shot to win this?*

At mile two I was still in first place, but now with a 50-yard lead. My pace felt comfortable and my breathing easy. *I think I can win this! I think I can do it!* However, I now had a strategic dilemma: *Do I continue to push for the fastest finish time I can, or do I adjust to the field with a goal to win regardless of time?* It took about a second to decide. *My goal is not to win this race, but to get as close to sub 3:00 as I can.* I held my pace.

I continued around the bends through the pine forest, looking for the chalk-scribbled arrows on the sidewalk for directions. At mile three I reached a fork in the path, but when I looked down, the path was completely covered in fallen tree leaves. I didn't see any arrows.

The wise unpretentious decision was to slow down and search for the pink arrows also posted on the trees. However, in my ego-inflated euphoria, I kept running, choosing to go left. Unfortunately, it wasn't right! A minute and a half later I found myself completely alone: no runners, no course markings, no volunteers. When I reached a busy intersection, I came to a complete stop. I looked left—nothing, then right—nothing. "Crap!!!!"

I doubled back on the path full speed and returned to the fork about a minute later, choosing right this time. I was now in about twentieth place. My pride took over, and I went full stride into a 10k pace passing runners left and right. I knew this was stupid; however, the course design was partially culpable. Had the course stretched out with long straight sections where I could see the trail of lead runners ahead, I would have slowly reeled them in.

However, with the bends and turns through the pine forest, I could only see runners 30 to 50 yards ahead. I ran as strong as I could trying to regain the lead, not knowing where I was in the pack. At mile five a volunteer called out to me, "Fourth!" I then saw the third-place runner about 40 yards ahead. I passed by and said, "You're looking good." He replied, "Hey, I was looking for you *ahead* of me!"

While approaching a S-shaped bend at mile five, I saw the two lead runners about 80 yards ahead. About a minute away from completing the first lap, I caught the leader. She was a good six feet tall with a single barbed wire tattoo around her upper left arm. When I said, "Good morning," she reciprocated the same, but with a thick British accent. She had a beautiful stride—strong and powerful. I was sure she was, or had been, a collegiate-level runner.

We crossed the timing mats together—she on a 3:09 pace and I on a 2:58 pace due to the extra distance! Since she had increased her stride as I caught her, I knew she also pictured herself winning. I decided to push hard for another mile to see if I could shake her.

By mile 10 I had regained my 50-yard lead, but my legs had tightened considerably because of the frantic pace. I eased back. With half a mile remaining in the second lap, she caught me. Her stride looked lessened a bit, but I knew she had more than I. "Go get 'em! You've got it!" I encouraged.

As I started the third lap, my quads were tight and I knew this was going to hurt. However, I had a strong and intense training cycle and knew that I had the endurance, if I could handle the pain. Halfway through the third lap, another runner approached from behind. "Yeah, looking good. How do ya' feel?" I asked as he pulled alongside. We chit-chatted for 15 seconds. "She's about a hundred yards ahead—you can catch her." He thanked me and broke away.

Now don't get me wrong—it's not that I wanted a man to win. Actually, I would've loved a female to be the overall winner. However, she was a woman, but he was an American.

Completing the third lap, I was hurting. In addition to the lactic acid I had built up trying to regain the lead, the course was 100 percent sidewalk-grade concrete. It really beats the hell out of you. A mile into the final lap, I was passed again. And again I offered encouragement and exchanged pleasantries. With a thick Nordic accent, he asked me where I was from. I replied "Corpus," and he replied, "Sweden." By his stride, I knew he would hold that pace to the finish and I wouldn't finish in the top three.

For the remainder of the final lap, I held a decent pace in spite of increasing leg cramps. Approaching the finish, I was covered in salt, a bit dehydrated, and ready to call it a day.

I crossed the finish in 3:17:03, placing 4th overall out of 221 marathon finishers. Ironically, the winner (the American), finished in 3:10:59.

Well in marathoning, as in life, sometimes you take a wrong turn. You can whine, complain, and sputter forth a litany of "if only" excuses. Or you can get back on track and "STHUAJR." The former is for children and fools, the latter for those sagacious enough to know it's better to attempt their best and come up short than to give up.

Overall, it was a fantastic event and great race, and I loved every minute of it. And besides—There's always next year!