

Flying With the Monkeys

How I Lost My Mind and Created a New Marathon.

BY S. TRENT ROSENBLOOM

What was I thinking? I mean, what business did I have putting together a marathon? I'm just a regular guy, just some local runner imbued with a touch of madness. Sure, I have picked up a marathoning addiction and have run far too many in too short a time for my own good. But to organize a new marathon? An insanely hard one? What was I thinking?

It began innocently enough, although these things tend to grow completely out of control all by themselves. We have a running club in Middle Tennessee called the Nashville Striders. In addition to all the races, training runs, and social events they put on to support local running, the Striders maintain an Internet message board with the stated purpose, "To serve the Nashville running community." Discussion threads vary widely, covering race performances, training-run locations, questions about health and nutrition, and occasional good old-fashioned trash talk. Runners use the message board to plan weekend runs and to plan or find routes. The board serves as a hub of information and entertainment for the virtual community of runners, with many having varying (and multiple) online personas and reputations.

Somewhere along the way, I picked up a reputation for using computerized online mapping tools to map nearly every possible running route for other runners. To be sure, I enjoy mapping my own runs, and I enjoy sharing my enthusiasm for the routes. Mapping routes appeals to the compulsions that keep me running. Specifically, I love numbers: the number of miles covered, the number of feet climbed, the number of minutes per mile, and so on. So I make maps for an ever-widening array of local training routes, races, and fun runs. Discovering and mapping routes through my hometown of Nashville ever delights me.

Middle Tennessee, including Nashville, has stunning natural public spaces that inspire exploring and running. The climate is favorable: while a bit hot and humid in the summer and gray and wet in the winter, the days are often capped in hazy and lazy sapphire skies and clothed in temperate airs with infrequent rains. A diverse topography undulates and flows, with some terrain flat or gently rolling and others peppered with abrupt hills and knobs. The region is clothed in forests,

swamps, meadows, rivers, neighborhoods, and city streets. In a single long outing, a runner can pass through a misty marsh, along the wandering river, through the heart of Nashville's downtown, through rolling subdivisions, and into a hilly and heavily wooded park. These features have helped to grow a strong running and outdoors community.

THE PARKS THE WARNERS BUILT

Two of the great resources for local runners (as well as for walkers, bikers, hikers, and even Sunday drivers) are the Warner Parks, on Nashville's west side. Percy Warner and Edwin Warner Parks, named after two 19th-century Nashville industrialists and philanthropists, encompass nearly 3,000 acres of hilly woodland, open fields, streams, and wetlands. Framed by hills filled with towering hardwoods and covered by lush fields and painted with colors that change with each passing season (if not with each passing day), the parks display an awesome and inspiring natural beauty. And this resource is within the Nashville city limits, easily accessible to anybody who lives there.

Winding through Percy Warner, the larger of the two parks, are numerous roads and dirt trails, including an 11.2-mile paved loop. This road, called simply "The 11.2" by local runners and bikers, may be the single best running resource



S. Trent Rosenbloom

▲ The long and winding road that leads into the woods and up over the hills. No yellow bricks, but plenty of flying monkeys.

in Middle Tennessee. Its winding and rolling loop path crosses woodlands, open fields, ridges, and knobs and connects various hiking trails, roads, cross-country fields, and grassy horse tracks. Overlooks spy the distant downtown and nearby hills. Together, the varied scenery, fauna, topography, and the changing seasons and foliage make every run in the park a treat anew.

But running the 11.2 is also a challenge. As you wind your way through its tree-shaded course, you endure over 1,500 feet each of elevation gain and loss, encountering grades of up to 10 to 12 percent. With its repetitive climbs, descents, and rolling terrain, the 11.2 demands the runner's attention and respect. Very few have completed the circuit in under an hour—although Dick Beardsley did so, racing the course under a pseudonym early in his career—and most struggle just to endure the loop. The 11.2 should never be taken lightly. So it made perfect, albeit crazy, sense that somebody would suggest the following, posted anonymously under the moniker “Run4U” on the Nashville Striders Internet message board:

Here's a crazy idea. If someone were to map a 26.2-mile racecourse in Percy Warner Park and the race were held in the late fall (mid-November maybe?), how many people do you think would attempt it? I think there would be a decent number of local runners willing to try it, even though it would be a real “old-school” marathon and not officially sanctioned. It would definitely be one of the hardest marathons in the country, and you would have huge bragging rights if you finished it. I have done a double loop of the 11.2, and it was harder than some of the “hilly” marathons I have done. Does anyone think there is a realistic chance of a Warner Park Marathon ever happening? Or am I just plain nuts?

A realistic chance? Just plain nuts? Well, perhaps so. But what an intriguing idea! And other local runners agreed. There followed a flurry of responses, including suggested courses, commentary on whether the run should be “organized” or just a bunch of runners showing up one morning to run, and musings about what kind



▲ Are those hills or monkey teeth?

of finishers awards there should be, if any at all. How hard would this marathon be? Would people actually run it? Should it cover Percy and Edwin Warner Parks, requiring a major roadway crossing but adding some fantastic climbs? A lot of great ideas and questions arose. And, true to my imposed reputation, I started mapping possible courses. Eventually the chatter died down, but I thought the idea was so good that I wanted to see it happen. Why not see whether I could come up with a final course, enlist the help of some folks who know how to put on a race, and then find out if anybody would register for the thing. *Does anyone think there is a realistic chance of a Warner Park Marathon ever happening?* Well, let's just see.

BRINGING THE ELEMENTS TOGETHER

But again, I was just some guy who happens to have a bit of a running problem. How do you put on a marathon? Well, the obvious first step was to design a good route. In this case, the route was clear. It had to be simple and yet devilishly tough in its simplicity. It would build on the double loop of the 11.2 referenced in Run4U's message. The double loop, made up by two circuits each direction around the 11.2, has always been one of Nashville's traditions of pain. Only the foolhardy attempt the double loop. Add to this the Shell Hill cut through, a hidden gem of a hill as tough as it is beautiful. Throw in the Vaughn Creek cross-country field, with its gentle, grassy field well known to many local high school runners. And for the final jewel, the Luke Lea overlook, providing its dramatic vistas of Nashville. The marathon would include all these, and they fit perfectly together to make up the necessary 26.2 miles, the forward/backward combination ensuring that runners would have to ascend every hill.

With these components, the course would carry participants over more than 3,000 feet each of elevation gain and loss, seven major climbs and innumerable uncounted rolls, and twists and turns enough to make anybody dizzy. The worst climb was positioned right at mile 19, the point when most marathoners' will falters. The course's elevation profile looked like an electrocardiogram gone crazy. It was perfect, painful, devious, twisted. Only somebody who was "just plain nuts" would want to run this beast.

With a memorable course planned, it was time to turn this dream into a reality. Fortunately, I was surrounded by people with the skills and interest necessary to develop this nascent marathon. This was not to be *my* marathon, but *our* marathon, grown up from the local running community. Together, we would need to determine how many runners should participate in the inaugural marathon, whether to certify the course, how we would manage the timing, and how we would advertise—and very important, we needed a name. Up until this point, all discussion about this marathon had a grassroots feel that bordered on an antiestablishment

sentiment. Many who had commented to me online or in person had suggested that this marathon should be an antidote for the big, modern flat and fast “events” that are spread out over 26.2 miles.

Using these sentiments as a guide, the answers to our questions were clear. This would be a small and intimate race, focused on the individual runner. We would register only 100 in the first year to keep the community of runners personal. The primary form of advertisement would be by word of mouth and via several Internet resources. Timing chips were antithetical to our purpose; timing would be done by tear tags. And the route would be decidedly uncertified (although measured to the correct distance) and unsanctioned. No bands. No cheerleading squads. We would keep it simple. It would be as if a small bunch of fools got together one morning to run 26.2 tough miles, with just enough course support to get them through. And we would provide the things that marathoners value, including technical shirts, good postrace food, and personalized bibs.



Lance Martin

▲ Bib numbers reflect the race’s personal touch.

MY KINGDOM FOR A DECENT NAME

But what to call this foolish marathon? This was fundamental; with the name, we needed to capture the grassroots insanity underlying this marathon and, if possible, the stunning and crazy terrain over which it runs. Numerous suggestions came in, but two in particular resonated. First, the anonymous Run4U went on to propose that we name the marathon after the Harpeth Hills; the Harpeth Hills refer to the geologic region where Percy Warner Park is situated, carved out by the nearby Harpeth River. Second, many thought that the marathon’s name should respect the rarely seen and often feared flying monkeys that inhabit the Warner Parks. Indeed, Percy Warner Park is one of the last known natural flying monkey habitats.

Before 1939, such monkeys were seen throughout the Southeast, with concentrations in Middle Tennessee and Appalachia and smaller communities outside Chattanooga and Natchez. As a result of overhunting, destruction of natural habitats, and simple human ignorance, flying monkeys no longer fill the skies. Only a few tribes remain, mostly relegated to dark hollows and dense woods. From the years of neglect and conflict, the monkeys now generally hide from humans whenever possible, and their numbers have dwindled.

What to call the marathon? The answer was clear: the Harpeth Hills Flying Monkey Marathon, a name that paid homage to the park’s beauty, to its insane relentless hills, and to its unique inhabitants. And with that name, perhaps a legend. That is, if anybody ever actually decided to run this thing, which was, of course, still in question.

► The wooden medal from the inaugural run. The leather strap is pretty good for reminding runners of the painful whipping they got from the course.



Lance Martin

We had a name, we had a route, and we had a vision. Now, we needed race-management experience. There was one obvious place to look. Because of their extensive experience managing races in the local running scene, their breadth of community involvement, and the fact that the marathon was originally dreamed up on their message board, I turned to the Nashville Striders for guidance. Fortunately, I had long known the Striders president, Peter Pressman. In fact, Peter’s stories of marathoning and steady healthy running over the years are two of the things that inspired me to tie on my first pair of Sauconies. With his quiet enthusiasm, careful attention to detail, and clear dedication to the running community, Peter has inspired many runners through the years. So I sent him a note.

Peter had read the initial message board discussion about this marathon and thought it would be an interesting idea to pursue. He suggested that I come to the next Nashville Striders board meeting and explain my idea. So I printed maps, came up with a rough estimate of locations for fluid stations and volunteer needs, and went to the meeting. Just about everybody on the board had also read the online discussion and had already thought it a neat idea, if a bit nutty. I pitched the details we had put together and then answered questions. Well, the board enthusiastically supported the idea, which meant the race was on and I would have the Striders’ expertise and manpower for the inaugural year. For that, this marathon will be forever indebted.

IT’S ALL IN THE DETAILS

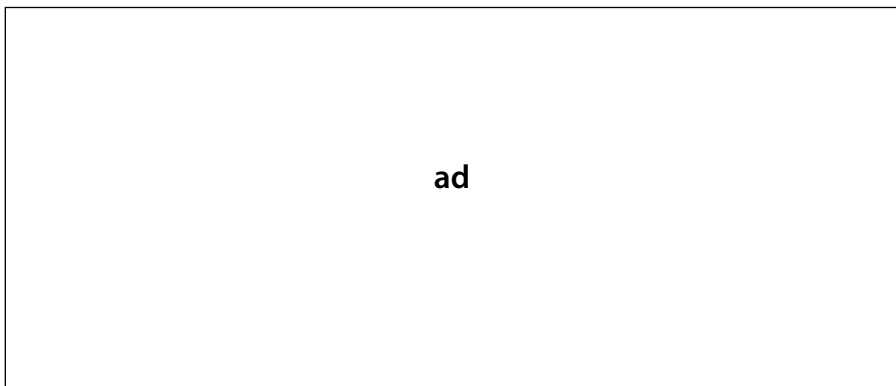
There were many small details to work out: obtaining a park permit, creating a Web site for the marathon, getting the word out, preparing for registration, writing copy to communicate to runners the history of the park and the flying monkeys, advertising for volunteers, and gathering feedback. This was all fairly straightforward work, further simplified by the resource I had in the Nashville Striders and the many enthusiastic local runners. I worked with the Parks, spent time making digital maps and designing the Web site, and took suggestions and answered questions. A lot of good ideas came in from the Nashville Striders, including Dallas’s “I would like to see some homemade medals” and Patty’s specification that the medal should be “a wooden ‘flying monkey.’”

Jeff suggested that in the spirit of our loose approach, we include in the race materials, “We promise to give you ‘approximately’ 26.2 miles,” while Lance

provided my favorite, “When you cross the finish line, if your gadget reads a shorter distance, keep running; if it reads too long, we won’t charge you extra.” Matt helped me select the first set of park photos for the Web site. And many other wonderful local runners helped turn this vision into something concrete, something that runners could respond to, could register for, and could run.

So on April 25, 2006, we held our breath and opened online registration. A few minutes later, an e-mail came in from a friend; Jill wrote simply, “I just signed up!” And then two more, and one more, and on: it had begun. Within about two months, registration filled and a waiting list began to form. We had runners from all over the country and one from Europe. We had attracted first-timers and serial marathoners as well as walkers, runners, and a few real speedsters. In no time, a virtual community arose, with local registrants training and dining together and more-distant ones meeting at other marathons and on the marathon Web site’s message board. In all the marathons I have run, I have never seen registrants come together and establish bonds in this way, even so long before the race. And this community comprised another rich source of ideas as we went on to put on the marathon.

There was a constant whirlwind of things to attend to. Design a shirt (long sleeve, moisture wicking, winged monkey on the back, runner’s name on the front), find somebody to make custom monkey-shaped wooden finishers’ medals, arrange for bibs, define volunteer jobs, determine fluid- and energy-station locations, identify a few sponsors to ensure that we financially break even, answer all the questions that came in, keep the Web site updated with registration information, organize a postrace food potluck, and contact the registrants themselves with updates. It was a steady bit of work to keep me occupied over the summer and early fall. Because of the incredible support from the community that had developed, I somehow found the time to run a bunch of marathons, including several with big hills, to get my legs ready to run the Monkey.



OH, YEAH! I GUESS I HAD BETTER SIGN UP, TOO

Yes. That's right. I too was going to run the inaugural Monkey. The community made it clear that if I were to inflict this marathon course on other runners, I would need to taste the poison myself. All the good people who helped me put this on and all the fools who registered expected me to run, and so I would be out there race morning in shorts with everybody else. But that did not allow me to relinquish my responsibilities for putting on the marathon; I still had to work with the fabulous volunteers to direct it. I still had to make sure that we started it correctly. And I had worked with the volunteers to measure (and remeasure) the course and mark the miles. And I too baked food to accompany the piles of homemade treats that volunteers brought for the runners—I made nine pumpkin pies, to be exact—and helped set up and take down. As if running a marathon were not enough, I also had the pleasure of working with the tireless volunteers as we put this mad thing together.

As race morning approached, the excitement in the community began to build. The whole event, from inception to execution, continued to maintain an organic grassroots feel, where a community of like-minded yet insane runners, generous volunteers, and helpful spectators came together to define and launch a memorable marathon and marathon weekend. I was fortunate to have been in the middle, surrounded and supported by this cycle of energy that led to the Monkey.

And I was witness to the emergence of a newfound family of “monkeys” (what the registrants had begun to call themselves) as they used the marathon Web site's message board to plan their own gatherings around the country, to share training plans, and to foster newfound friendships. Monkeys speculated on the effect of the hills on their pace and finish times. They taunted each other in prerace mental monkey



► The race director flashes the smile of a mad scientist.

Ely Foster

play. Registered for an insane marathon, this troop of monkeys came together to commiserate over the approaching pain. The local running community had come together with the idea of creating a back-to-basics and hard-as-nails marathon, and a new community developed to make it happen and to make it memorable.

And so, on November 19, 2006, at 7:00 A.M., standing before a crowd of about 100 foolish monkey runners (along with a few bandits and a few dogs) assembled on a frost-covered cross-country field, below a range of knobby hills and a slate-gray sky, and held up by numerous volunteers spread throughout the 3,000 wooded and flying monkey-ridden acres behind me, I fired the starting gun. We were off. A marathon was inaugurated, and a tribe of monkeys was born.

Well, I'll Be a Monkey's Interviewer

On November 19, 2006, 97 registered runners and a smattering of bandits participated in the inaugural Harpeth Hills Flying Monkey Marathon in Nashville, Tennessee's, legendary Percy Warner Park. Our curiosity in this marathon was piqued when we received an invitation to the race. We get invitations all the time, but this was the first to appear to have been clawed into a piece of bark. We dispatched one of our intrepid correspondents to cover the race and then machete his way deep into the Park's hemlock-shrouded bowels, where GPS units fear to tread, for an interview with the self-styled King of the Flying Monkeys. This is his interview.

Marathon & Beyond: Wow, your resemblance to the image on the wooden finisher's medal is uncanny. Are you real?

Flying Monkey: Let me begin by saying welcome to the jungle. As for your question, yes I am real and if you are harboring any lingering doubts, I would be happy to use this [*here he removed his glasses and flashed a manicured claw*] to scoop out your intestines, maybe read them like the ancient Romans, and see if that doesn't allay your suspicions.

M&B: That won't be necessary. And you are the King of the Flying Monkeys?

FM: Please, call me Rex. We try to think of ourselves as a nonhierarchical utopian commune here [*here he leaned in and whispered*], but off the record, "I'm the king of the swingers, the jungle VIP."

M&B: This is a gorgeous place you have.

FM: Percy Warner Park? It is paradise—nearly 3,000 acres of hills, ridges, forest, and rock formations. We have the paved 11.2-mile main drive that winds through here, but other than that, the park is serene and unadulterated. You'd

never know all those honky-tonks are just a few miles away. By the way, can I get you anything? Coffee, Perrier, demitasse of warm trail-runner's blood?

M&B: *No, thanks. I'm fine right now. So what do you do all day? Forage?*

FM: No, we don't forage. Don't you do your research? We still get royalties from *The Wizard of Oz*. It keeps us very comfortable, if you know what I mean. We were lucky. Kong may not have flown, but he was one savvy ape, and he insisted that we unionize. It was the best thing we ever did. After *Oz*, we did a little acting here and there, but they don't write great parts like that any more.

M&B: *Retirement working for you?*

FM: Most of us are content to count our royalties. We have a few Norma Desmonds around here brooding over their return to Hollywood. But most are happy to wait for the right opportunity to come along. We get calls all the time, but who wants to go on the latest iteration of *The Apprentice*. It's so undignified.

M&B: *Were you in that Planet of the Apes remake?*

FM: The one with Marky Mark? Please. There was some talk about moving to Las Vegas and doing a show called *Soaring Simian Spectacular*. But at the last minute, the casino went with Blue Man Group. I think our agent screwed us.

M&B: *You fire him?*

FM: Something like that.

[It was here that I noticed the distinct cranial qualities of his coffee mug.]

M&B: *I have to confess I'm a little shocked.*

FM: Come on, pal. We have opposable thumbs just like you.

M&B: *Does it get boring?*

FM: Well, the runners come through, so we harass them for sport. That's how I met Trent Rosenbloom [*The Flying Monkey race director*]. He's in here most weekends trying to climb these hills. I'd perch myself in a maple or oak and watch him struggle. It was just sad.

M&B: *Let's talk about him since he was the driving force behind the marathon.*

FM: Trent Rosenbloom is a class act, a tireless promoter of Nashville running. Around here, we call him the Monkey Whisperer, and we read all his postings on the Nashville Striders message board.

M&B: *You have Internet?*

FM: Wi-Fi. We love it. Before, it was hell getting *Daily Variety* delivered. Besides, on the Internet, no one knows you're a monkey. Anyway, where was I? The marathon idea started as idle chatter on the Striders message board, but Trent took it seriously and ran with it, no pun intended.

M&B: Really? Is he retired, too?

FM: You would think so, given the time he dedicated to the marathon. But he's married, father of two, and a physician at Vanderbilt. The guy can keep more balls in the air than Enrico Rastelli.

M&B: Who?

FM: Enrico Rastelli. Look it up.

M&B: Is he fast?

FM: Enrico Rastelli?

M&B: No, Trent, the race director.

FM: He could be, but he's a serial marathoner more interested in a body of work than an individual achievement. He has a great sense of humor, too. Before the race, there were reports of sightings of, and here I'm quoting *The Tennessean*, a "cougarlike beast" in the park. Let me just say that there are always going to be opportunists, even in the animal kingdom, trying to bask in the glow of another's celebrity. Anyway, at some races—between the insurers and the lawyers—that would have been enough to shut the event down. But Trent told everyone at the starting line that if they saw the beast to "look it in the eyes and walk back slowly until you tripped over something." Now that's funny.

[At this point, I became aware of some rustling to my left. The King of the Flying Monkeys noticed my apprehension.]

FM: That's George. Don't mind him, he's just—

M&B: Curious?

FM: I was going to say inquisitive.

M&B: How did you get involved with the marathon?

FM: Trent pitched it to us. He promised that it was not going to be just any marathon. It was going to be in our backyard, for one thing. Percy Warner Park is many things, but fast and flat it isn't. With about 3,300 feet of elevation gain and loss, it would attract some real masochists. I heard runners comparing it to Grandfather Mountain, Pikes Peak, and Big Sur. It was also going to be an intimate affair, just 100 runners and plenty of volunteers to take care of them. It would not be one of these slick numbers with wave starts, bands, a Jumbotron, and runners dressed like Elvis.

M&B: Any other reason you lent your name, to say nothing of your countenance, to the marathon?

FM: We had a personal stake in this thing. Some of us are tired of the way the media portray us. Others wanted to take the limelight back from those ivory-billed woodpeckers. And did I mention the food?

M&B: You did not.

FM: The local running community turned out in force to support this marathon. Not only were they volunteering all over the course, they brought plenty of great-tasting food for the finishers. You should have seen the spread. I counted nine homemade pumpkin pies.

M&B: Any monkey bread?

FM: Now you're just being sarcastic.

M&B: Marathons are sprouting up everywhere, but this one does sound unique.

FM: It reminded me of the clothing line FUBU—For Us By Us. This was a race for runners by runners. It had a certain purity to it. I think that's why it drew so many ultrarunners.

M&B: I didn't realize that about the ultrarunners.

FM: Sure, the winner was an ultrarunner, and there were many others. For instance, consider Mike Lipton from the Richmond, Virginia, area. He heard about the race on Thursday, registered off the waiting list on Friday, then drove nine hours so he could run it. He's completed 21 marathons and 21 ultras, including two 100-milers in 2006 and the Richmond Marathon the week before the Monkey.

M&B: That's impressive.

FM: That guy is our target audience.

M&B: By the way, I love your wingtips.

FM: Thanks, I just had them shined.

M&B: Let's talk about the winner, Jeff Edmonds.

FM: And a philosopher shall lead them. Did you know he's a philosophy Ph.D. candidate at Vanderbilt and that this was his first marathon? What a great headline: First-Time Marathoner Wins First-Time Marathon.

M&B: Were you surprised that he ran the course in 2:50?

FM: A little, but it's not easy to shock this monkey. You know the over/under was three hours, and almost all of the action was on the over side. But he is a strong runner, he ran for Williams College, and I have to believe that his ultra-running background proved valuable on race day. I hear he negative-split the course and looked fresh at the finish. Another thing: he had the weight of the Nashville running community on his shoulders. When you host an inaugural marathon, you want one of your local runners to hold serve for you. So he had some added pressure, especially when Chuck Engle signed on.

M&B: How about Chuck Engle?

FM: Yes, the Marathon Junkie himself. That guy has an impressive body of work and he can flat out run. When he signed on, it gave us some additional cachet. But I heard he won a marathon the day before and showed up hoping to win this one too. Not so fast. At the end of the day, it was the Monkey that beat the Junkie, not the other way around.

M&B: Let's talk about the women's side and the winner, Jessica Southers.

FM: She is another local runner who ran for the University of Tennessee a few years ago. This was only her second marathon and she set a PR. Can you believe that? I have been seeing her in the Park since she registered in May. I flew alongside her before the race, and she told me she knew the course like the back of her paw, I mean hand. It showed on race day, when she raced most of it alone. She said the hills have her utmost respect, and it puts every other course she has run to shame.

M&B: So what's next for the Monkey?

FM: Well, we've already started planning for 2007. I hear they're going to increase the field to 200, and they expect it to fill quickly. I suspect I'll hit the talk shows, *Oprah*, *Ellen*, *Meet the Press*. They can't send Trent. He's awful in front of the camera.

M&B: Anything else?

FM: I was talking to a buddy in Scotland about helping him with a Loch Ness Triathlon.

[He stared at me intently for several beats, then convulsed with laughter.]

FM: I think I had you for a second.

M&B: You did.

FM: Listen, I'd love to do this all day, but I have some other business I need to finish.

M&B: Monkey business?

FM: Good one. I never heard that one before.

—Lance Martin



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