

My Own Private Marathon

A race director with a twist.

BY JAKE EMMETT

It's the day before my fall marathon, and I'm just like Harvey Danger, who sings, "I'm not sick, but I'm not well." All that training, and now what? Should I stay home and not run the Lewis & Clark Marathon or run and not feel well? I could at least drive to St. Charles, Missouri, and see if I get an answer along the way. So like a clueless teenager going to a remote summer camp on Friday the 13th, I pack my things and make the two-hour drive.

I easily locate the running stores where I pick up my race packet. Always eager to see what treasures are to be found in the goody bag, I tear into it to find a shirt, race announcements, and coupons for carbohydrate-rich food, but no race number. *That's odd*, I think to myself. I've never run a marathon without a race number. It's the most important thing in the bag. I return to the expo and find a friendly worker who quickly verifies that I am registered and therefore should indeed have a race number.

She looks through a stack of orphaned bib numbers, but mine is not among them. Hmm, I wonder, is this a sign—like a dead phone line—telling me that I shouldn't run the marathon? Probably, but like the blonde bimbo who continues to walk into a dark room of a haunted mansion even though the brand-new light bulb suddenly goes out, I need another sign. Just then a kind woman hands me a new race bib, which I'm relieved to see is not the number 666.

Slightly concerned and still not feeling well, I drive to the hotel for some premarathon relaxation, but instead it's déjà vu. My reservation is confirmed, but my room is not ready despite the fact that it's 5:00 P.M. I think again, *Hmm*, as in, "Why is the butcher knife missing from the knife rack?" Still, the second sign is unable to fully penetrate my thick skull. So while my room is being prepared, I drive to the starting area, hoping for a crucifix or clove of garlic, but as I look at the starting area and see banners flying and hard-working volunteers setting up signs, I feel as empty as Herman Munster's head.

Where are the usual premarathon excitement and the slight twinge of nervousness? Where is that Christmas Eve-like feeling of, “I can’t wait for tomorrow morning?” Parked on the shoulder of the road, I turn on the radio hoping to hear something positive like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ “Runnin’ Down a Dream,” but instead I get “King of Pain” by the Police.

That’s it. I might be oblivious to obvious signs, but when Sting speaks, I listen. No racing bib and no hotel room are somewhat disconcerting, but I will not ignore a prophetic warning of impending pain and suffering from the man who penned the rock classic “De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da.” This was the ice pick in the back of the camp counselor—so to speak. I cancel the hotel room and drive home disappointed but relieved that I likely avoided 26.2 miles of B-grade horror.

Why not?

By the time I pull into our driveway, the relief is replaced with dissatisfaction. As I explain to my wife, Lesa, the reason for my early return, I turn on the computer to look for a marathon to run within the next few weeks.

My first thought is: *Why not fly to Utah and run the Top of Utah Marathon?* Unfortunately, the answer was found in expensive airfare. My brother Tom and his wife, Shelly, will be running that marathon, but they’ll have to find some other chump to beat.

How about a nearby midwestern marathon? Unfortunately, I find only races that are closed or boring. I know the latter is not a legitimate reason to not run a marathon, but I’m partially into marathon running for the experience, and some locations just aren’t fun. It’s like running to Michael Bolton music. Some people might like to, but I would rather run with railroad spikes driven into each ear. If running a marathon in Cornville, USA, is my best option, I might as well stay home and run my own marathon.

Wait a minute, I say to myself. *Why not run my own marathon here in Charleston?* Charleston is a great running town. Home to Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, aka Chucktown, is located in east-central Illinois just where an ancient glacier stopped its slide southward. This provides Charleston runners with glacier-flattened terrain to the north, including a 12-mile rails-to-trails path and rolling hills to the south. Traffic in Chucktown never gets too bad, and thanks to the efforts of Tom Woodall, who established the Run for Your Life club in the early 1960s, most drivers are friendly toward runners. Until now, I never realized just how runner friendly Charleston is, so why not run a marathon here?

OK. When?

How about this coming Saturday? My sinus infection should be gone, and it’s the same day that Tom and Shelly will be running the Top of Utah Marathon and another brother, Bill, will be running his first ultramarathon in Moab, Utah.

Saturday it is. I'll be able to form a telekinetic bond with my running kin as we suffer and rejoice simultaneously on a cosmic but very primal level—or it will just be fun to run my race on the same day as theirs.

My preliminary marathon plans include a list of the pros and cons of hosting my own private marathon. First the list of pros:

1. Finish first and not just in my usual age division of men 40-49 with the middle name Dudley.
2. Make up my own course. I blend my favorite runs in a logical pattern and, with a little tweaking, I've got 26.2 miles. I put the start and finish line right in front of my house (no need for buses or porta-potties), and I end up with a mostly loop course with an out-and-back section between miles 18 and 24. There are two hills, both in the first eight miles, plenty of tree-lined sections, and even a few miles on the soft bike trail north of town.
3. The race can start when I decide it starts. I set the official start time as "somewhere around 6:30." No need to set an alarm or ask for a wake-up call.
4. Name it what I want. I could go with a corporate sponsor name such as Norda's Mountain Outfitters of Logan, Utah, First Annual Marathon. Or I could use a local celebrity (The Burl Ives Jimmy Crack Corn Marathon), local university (Eastern Illinois University Fighting Panthers Marathon), or local institution (Jimmy John's Sandwiches Made So Fast You'll Freak Marathon). Other options are the Not the Lewis & Clark Marathon and The One-Day, One-State, One-Person Marathon. I settle on the cozy sound of My Own Private Marathon.

Now for the list of cons:

1. No aid stations. If I ask nicely, my beautiful wife, Lesa, could have a support vehicle (our Pathfinder) waiting at various points loaded with anything I need as long as I remember to put it in the Pathfinder the night before.
2. No spectators. The Chicago Marathon has 50 times more spectators than Chucktown has residents. The only cheers I'll hear will be through my iPod from people like The Who, U2, and The Go-Go's (my guilty pleasure).
3. Speaking of music, I won't have the prerace motivation of loud music blasting from huge speakers at the start line. No matter where I am, every time I hear Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," I'm taken back to the starting line of the Chicago Marathon and singing (or rather screaming) with the other runners, "Tramps like us, baby, we were born to run" as we crossed the starting line.

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4. No pacing off other runners, but then, no one will pass me.
5. The course won't be certified: no problem, since my best marathon time would qualify me to run Boston only if I were a 90-year-old female or a famous celebrity.
6. No mile markers. I could go out in the middle of the night and paint them on the road, but I'll likely just go with a mental map as I run.
7. No bib number. Even if I am the only runner, it's not really a race without a race number. But where can I order one race bib and have it by Saturday? Wait a minute! I have the unused number from the Lewis & Clark Marathon. But would wearing it make me look stupid? Or even worse, would it break some marathoner's code that says you can't wear racing bibs outside of the intended race? I'll have to think about it.

After a little deliberation, I decide the pros win. I'm going to stage My Own Private Marathon. First I tell Lesa, who has been putting up with my marathon shenanigans for six years, about My Own Private Marathon, and not only does she restrain her laughter until I'm out of earshot, but she agrees to drive the support vehicle. Not wanting to ask too much, I decide to run with a water bottle and have Lesa meet me with fresh supplies at miles eight and 16. With that arranged, all that's left is to do the running.

My marathon

Without an alarm, I wake up around 5:30 A.M. and consume my typical premarathon breakfast: a banana and an energy bar that I wash down with some Dr. Pepper. I check the forecast and see highs in the 60s, with cloudy skies and a chance of thundershowers as the day progresses. Not too bad. I do some final editing of my iPod playlist, check the current temperature (low 50s), and get dressed. I decide not to wear the bib number, thinking it will make me look like a running wannabe. Inside the Pathfinder, I put one plastic bag with fuel sources (gels and energy bars) and another one with medical supplies (pain medications, bandages, CPR instructions, and so forth). I write a note to Lesa asking her to also bring the two water bottles I've left in the fridge.

By 6:45, my breakfast is digested and I'm ready to go. Lesa wakes up just in time to double-check with me on the location of the first aid station and my anticipated time of arrival. "Sister City Park, around 8:10. I'll call you if I'm not on schedule," I tell her. Just as before any other run, she tells me to be careful, and I say I will. I walk out the door, but unlike a typical run, I don't start my watch right away. I walk to the official starting line—a crack in the road just in front of our driveway—and pause briefly. I look around and see no Kenyans, no rabbits, no pace teams. I hear no cheering crowd or blaring music. I look at my



Courtesy of Jake Emmett

▲ Approaching the Sister City Park aid station.

watch, press start, and begin on my own private marathon (or a training run if my last name were Jurek).

With my iPod set on shuffle, “Born To Run” comes up third as I run past the EIU softball field. It’s not the same as hearing it at the start of the Chicago Marathon, but I’m not running elbow to elbow in a sea of 40,000 marathoners, either. I look at my watch, calculate my pace, and speculate where Tom and Shelly are in their marathon. I also wonder about Bill running his first ultramarathon in weather that called for snow.

No snow here, and the air is perfectly cool. I notice a few leaves about to turn color and think, *What a great morning for a run*. I’ve never experienced a runner’s high, but the closest I’ve come is when the perfect song and scenery appear simultaneously, as they do right now. I hear “This could be the very minute I’m aware I’m alive” from “Chocolate” by Snow Patrol as I cross a small river lined by colorful foliage. *Wow. This is great. I feel like I could run a marathon*, I think to myself. Then it hits me. Since I feel like it, I might as well look like it! I call Lesa from my cell phone and ask her to pin the bib number on my other running shirt and bring it with her to mile eight.

The only serious hill, locally known as Bedroom Wall, is just before mile eight. Why is it called Bedroom Wall? I don’t know, but I do know it’s steep. Thankfully, it’s also short. Knowing that Bedroom Wall was part of the route, I

decided ahead of time to walk up “the wall.” However, a chunk of superpowerful glycogen kicks in at the base of the hill, and I run up the wall. At the top, I want to stop and kick myself, but my legs are quivering too much. I just hope the energy I wasted running up the hill won’t be needed later on.

My legs quickly de-quiver, and a few minutes later I approach Sister City Park, where Lesa is waiting with all my supplies. I change to the shirt with the bib number, get a fresh water bottle, and exchange a used gel packet for a fresh one. As I leave, I tell her to meet me at the bike-trail parking area near the fairgrounds (mile 16) at 10:00 A.M. I feel her roll her eyes at me after I leave.

The next couple of miles take me through town. The course has me crossing Highway 130, a somewhat busy two-lane highway that runs through town. I look to my right and see a car coming. I decide against sprinting across in front of it, so I slow up to let the car pass only to have it make a left turn before getting to me. *How hard is it to signal?* I wonder. Memo to self: show even greater appreciation to the traffic control of a real marathon where you can run through an intersection without having to look both ways.

The route takes me through a sleepy subdivision and past the Moose Lodge where the bingo junkies hang out. On the other side of Walmart and in another subdivision, I see my first runner. He’s a college-aged runner coming toward me much faster than I’m running toward him. We pass, and he gives me a very odd look, like I’m Rosie Ruiz coming out of the subway at Boston. *What was that?* I wonder. Most runners are very accepting of old, slow joggers. Why did he look at me as though I had no right hitting the pavement? A sudden rush of blood to my head clues me in. *It’s your stupid bib number, you idiot.* My head is right. You don’t run around town by yourself wearing a race bib and not expect strange looks, especially from serious runners. However, I rationalize, I’m different from Rosie. She pretended to run an official marathon, while I’m officially running a pretend marathon.

I’m out in the country when I think about the runner’s high again, but this time it’s just due to the music, since I’m surrounded by boring cornfields. It’s the lyrics, “Your hands and feet are mangos,” from a Phish song. I conclude that whichever Phish penned those words was high (not too much of a stretch), but I wonder whether it was the result of a long run. I doubt it, but you never know. Just then the image of a runner with feet and hands of mangos causes me to chuckle out loud. It’s a good thing that no one saw me, because surely they would have wanted to commit a gray-haired geezer running loose in the country wearing a race bib and laughing to himself.

Soon after, the asphalt is replaced by the rails-to-trails bike trail. Its soft surface is quickly noticed by my feet. I jumped on at what is the trail’s mile zero, and I’ll be running to mile eight, although the trail goes for a dozen miles. At the mile-three marker, I pass another runner, and he also gives me a very strange

look, but this time I get it, and I smile back, but not too much. I don't want to appear any crazier than I am.

At mile 15, I realize I miscalculated my ETA for mile 16. I told Lesa it would be 10:00, rather than 9:50. I called Lesa, who is still home, to tell her I'm almost at mile 16. Optimistically she says, "Wow. You're ahead of schedule." I wish it were true, but it only means that my math skills become even worse when I run. She agrees to meet me at mile 17 instead, where the trail crosses the Old State Highway. Lesa will have no problem driving through Charleston in time to meet me at mile 17, but to make sure, I slow down to give her a little extra time. Well, that's my excuse. I actually slow down because I'm getting tired.

The old railroad bed is very straight, so I can see the Pathfinder well ahead of my arrival. As I get closer, I see not only Lesa but two of our daughters, Molly and Erin. All three are cheering me along. At least I assumed it was for me. For all I know, they are cheering for the men in the white suits who are coming to take me away. Within hearing range, I realize that the cheers really are for me, and they sound surprisingly great. In fact, their three voices motivate me more than a million cheering Chicagoan good-hearted strangers. They give me an energy bar and a fresh water bottle. I ask for a towel. They don't have one, but Molly, dressed in layers, lets me use one of her T-shirts. "What a sacrifice," I say. "No problem," says Molly. "It belongs to my ex-boyfriend, Eric."



Courtesy of Jake Emmett

▲ Running toward the "cheering through" at the mile 17 aid station.

Recharged, I take on the last three miles of the out portion, which is lined with trees, passes by a large pond, and goes right through the middle of the local country club. It may be a bit narcissistic, but it's a great motivator seeing lazy golfers sitting in golf carts as I run by. It also reaffirms my decision to sell my golf clubs. Besides the motivation I get, there is another thing I like about this part of the trail. On long, hot runs the water fountain on the 17th tee serves as an emergency aid station. There are no sports drinks or gel packets, but trespassers can't be choosers.

One mile beyond the country club, I'm at the turnaround point for the out-and-back portion. The golf-course trees are behind me and nothing but cornfields in front of me. This gives me a little too-perfect view of dark clouds gathering in the west. Almost at the same time I see a flash of lightning, I get a cramp in my right calf muscle. Who knew lightning caused muscle cramps? I stop to stretch and think how sad it would be to be hit by lightning while running a marathon. I imagine my friends saying, "The only reason he was hit by the lightning was because he ran so slowly!" I have morbid, unsympathetic friends. Then I wonder if a lightning strike would be how the golf gods would punish me for the water I borrowed from the 17th tee. I immediately stop stretching and get moving.

I know the next miles will be slower thanks to the cramp in my calf, and some of my motivation is gone when I see that the threatening lightning has chased away the golfers. Now what will I use for motivation? (Obviously, although they are lazy golfers, they are also smart golfers.) It is not very long before I find fresh motivation, realizing that I am running not only toward the finish line but also toward my home—literally. I push through the golf course, past the aid station where my cheering party was parked, and to mile 24—and only two miles to go to home. I've passed this point, coming and going, many times on training runs but never before with 24 miles under my belt. I try to forget about all the miles behind me and focus on the remaining two miles. I try to imagine I'm at this spot at another time when my legs were fresh and my brain was fully functional. My energy-deprived brain starts to buy into it, but my legs aren't fooled. Nothing is going to make them forget that they've run any less than 24 miles—damn nongullible legs.

Suddenly, I find myself running up a "hill." Wait! How did that happen? I don't remember this hill on the course map. What idiot puts a hill in the last two miles of a marathon? The answer to that question was not immediately processed by my sluggish brain, but I soon realize that I'm an idiot. I try to distract myself by saying it's not really a hill but merely a slightly downward modification in the local terrain. Fatigue sure does accentuate the negative.

At the top of the "hill," I see the 25-mile mark located just before the four-lane highway I have to cross. Other than the weekend that college students return each fall, the only other day the highway has ever been crowded was when the local

Super Walmart had its grand opening, so crossing today should not be a problem. Sure enough, as I approach, there are few cars on the highway; however, with lactate-filled legs, I may as well be trying to cross the Indianapolis Speedway on Memorial Day. Seeing no large break in traffic (which would be no traffic at all), I'm forced to "sprint" across all four lanes. *Now, I think, is when I could really use the energy I dumped back at Bedroom Wall.* Three steps into traffic, my right calf cramps up, and only an unknown, but greatly appreciated, skill for speed hopping prevents me from becoming the hood ornament of a white Chrysler LeBaron. Thank goodness for front-disc brakes and the good people of Charleston who know how to use them. As I safely reach the other side, I wonder how many calls the police received describing a "troll-like character running like Festus from *Gunsmoke* across Highway 16, and, oh yeah, for some reason he's wearing a race-bib number."

On the bright side, I discovered that fear can scare cramps out of muscles. Safely on the opposite side of the road, my right leg feels good enough for me to vanish into a quiet subdivision that borders the university campus. The shady area allows me to catch my breath literally and figuratively before I reach the athletic fields and jogging trail of Eastern Illinois University. I plod along the jogging trail that winds past football, baseball, and soccer fields. I love running this trail, but I don't want any colleagues or students to see how terrible I look. There's nothing more pathetic looking than a recreational runner, like me, during the last mile of a marathon. Our hair is matted from mistakenly pouring Gatorade instead of water over our heads, while salt deposits cake our cheeks. Add to this a running gait reminiscent of something seen in *Dawn of the Dead*, and you have a sight for no eyes. Fortunately, the only people I see near the trail are playing rugby, and I'm confident I don't look any worse than a rugby player.

From the rugby field, I can see the finish, but unfortunately the trail, my course, winds around the

► Walking through my own personal finish line, our front door.



Courtesy of Jake Emmett

perimeter of more playing fields and a disc-golf course. I'm tempted to follow the shortest distance to the finish by cutting across the disc-golf course. Who would know? There are no race officials, no crowd, and no other marathoners. It's just me and athletes who play a sport where eye gouging and biting are acceptable behaviors. Even if they knew what I was doing, I doubt that they would call me out for cheating. Then I think: *Why cut my own private marathon short? I'm going to win in course-record time, but only as long as I run a full marathon—with the emphasis on full.* Persuaded to do so, I follow the course to mile 26 where I traditionally curse Queen Alexandra of England, who extended the 1908 Olympic marathon from 26 to 26.2 miles. "I would be crossing the finish line if it hadn't been for some snooty queen who insisted the finish line be directly in front of the royal box because heaven forbid the Queen of England should have to turn her head a full two degrees to the left to see the finish!"

A few insights



Courtesy of Jake Emmett

▲ Soaking it all in while eating Molly's brownies and wearing Erin's medal.

I also missed the expo, picking out other runners at the hotel and restaurant, the prerace gathering, the postrace bustle and noise, and everything else that goes with a real marathon. Even though my legs and feet felt like they had run a marathon, the rest of me wasn't sure. However, if you look in my basement where I tack all my marathon medals, you'll see hanging with all the rest a homemade medal from my own private marathon. 

Shortly after disrespecting the queen, I cross the finish line four hours and 26 minutes after I started and arrive back home. I get a round of congratulations from Lesa, Molly, and Erin. Molly baked me some victory brownies, and Erin made me a medal. I sling the medal around my neck, take the plate of brownies and any other postrace grub that suits my fancy, collapse in front of the television, and ponder how running my own private marathon compared to running a real marathon. I enjoyed running alone, but I missed seeing other runners.