

A Father's Surprise

Be vigilant when you're running a race; someone may be stalking you.

BY ROY REISINGER

“You're dead meat, Dad!” The voice and the giggle just behind me were oh, so familiar, but in this context, they just didn't compute. I was in Alaska, just about to step behind the starting line rope before racing the *Anchorage Daily News* Heart Run. The only people in the world who would be addressing me as “Dad” were my three daughters, each thousands of miles away. So something didn't fit.

Even when I turned and was face to face with daughter Julia's huge smile, there was still another moment of confusion. I had just spoken with her the night before last; she was in Portland, Oregon, yesterday, taking her graduate school comprehensive exams. She couldn't be here.

But sure enough, this little twerp was standing there in front of me and had announced her presence by declaring that she was going to whip my butt in this 5K. Two seconds more and the reality registered, followed by hugs and laughs and tears.

As we jumped behind the starting line, the usually tense and serious front-runners were all smiles and laughs, having just witnessed this scene. A few seconds later and we were off, our attention barely on the race as Julia explained how she

Courtesy of the Reisinger Family



▲ Julia has just greeted me at the start of the Heart Run in Anchorage with the words, “You're dead meat, Dad!”

came to be there. I happened to be the race director of this event, a fund-raiser for the Heart Association and Alaska's largest race at about 4,000 participants (now over 6,000). It seems that my race committee had decided to surprise me by pitching in and collecting the money to fly Julia up from Portland. As it turned out, we laughed and talked and ran together the whole way in about 18 minutes; Julia actually finished as the second woman overall despite her travel and lack of focus. I ran the whole thing with a happy heart and a smile.

This was not the first running surprise in our family, but it was the first in which I had been the "surprisee." Up to this time, I had always been the "surpriser."

Actually, as I think about it, that's not exactly true. My own parents turned the trick on me 45 years ago. They had supported my running career by attending all my high school races and many of my college races in track and cross-country. My mother always arrived beforehand with a jar of honey, a few spoonfuls apparently being essential to my success. But I wasn't expecting them at my second marathon (the first one I finished) in Ocean City, New Jersey, so it was a welcome boost when they pulled up alongside me at mile three and cheered out the car window. After I finished, having bonked in the last mile and been forced to walk, just missing my three-hour goal, I collapsed, cold and shivering, into the back seat of their car. Whereupon my mother, basically a teetotaler, surprised me even further by passing back a small, brown paper bag containing a flask of peach brandy. Peach brandy! From my mother! I was totally shocked. But I dutifully swallowed a couple of belts, and I've got to tell you, it sure was fine, just what I needed at that moment. (Funny: years later I tried to sip a peach brandy and didn't care for it one bit; context is everything.)

But I digress. Julia's unexpected arrival in Anchorage was payback. I had gotten her twice. The first time, she was running for Cornell in a major cross-country meet on the campus of Pennsylvania State University. After attending a conference in New York City, I popped in on her at about the two-mile mark of her race. She was used to my appearances all over the courses she ran in high school but was indeed taken aback at my unexpected appearance on the East Coast. I hoped that it didn't break her concentration too badly.

Julia chose New York City to run her first marathon. I would have loved to surprise her there, but think about that for a minute. Finding somebody in that mob is virtually impossible. So I signed up, and we shared the entire experience: the pasta dinner, the bus ride to Staten Island, the crowds shouting our names in Brooklyn (we had a contest to see who drew the most cheers from our personalized T-shirts: "Go Roy" or "Go Julia"), her first bonking experience in Manhattan, and even the candy in the medical tent at the finish.

The second surprise was her second marathon, in Portland. Her goal was to break three hours, so I knew that she would be lining up near the front. I began near the back, with the intention of working my way up as the race progressed

until I found her. This meant that I started very slowly because of the crowd. By the time I had more running room, I had to really hoof it to catch her, which I finally did at seven miles, by which time I was a pooped papa. But I recovered, and after her surprise at my appearance at her side, we had a good run of it. Unfortunately, she had two episodes of bad side stitches, causing her to slow to a walk and miss her time goal. But that was OK, too, because this time it was me who bonked in the last mile or two, and seeing that she wasn't going to break three hours, she gladly slowed her pace for poor old Dad, just as I had done for her in New York.

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Well, enough about Julia. She has two sisters, including her twin, Tracy, and Tracy got her own surprise at her first marathon, when she was a sophomore at Willamette University. She chose the Trails End Marathon in Seaside, Oregon, for her debut at the distance.

(I must digress for a moment and ask you, dear reader, a question. Am I the only one who views his daughter's *first marathon* as about the same as a bat mitzvah, or a coming-out party, or whatever . . . certainly the most important event in her life to that point and certainly one for which you *must* be present at all costs? I'm right, right? Of course. You agree, or else you wouldn't be reading this magazine.)

Tracy's older sister, Marina (she will get hers, just wait), was in on this one. She picked up my bib number for me so I didn't have to make an appearance at the registration, where Tracy might have spotted me. From my perch atop an adjacent parking garage, I watched her line up with Tracy at the back of the small-ish starting group; she told Tracy that she wanted to get a few snapshots of her in the first mile. As they took off, I was only 10 yards behind. After two blocks, I had closed the gap, at which point Marina surged ahead "to get a shot of you running toward me." A few seconds later I moved alongside Tracy and asked, "OK if I run along?" She glanced over and said, "Sure," then did a double take and screamed, "Dad! . . . Oh, my God!" Marina was in perfect position to capture the moment for family posterity.

The next few miles passed quickly as I described the logistics of traveling there, hiding out, and conspiring with Marina. We chatted away the middle miles, enjoying the experience. Finally, at about classic mile 20, she began to hit The Wall.

Now here was where I felt that I could actually be useful. Despite having completed about 30 marathons and a handful of ultras, I've never been any good at it. My best is 2:37, but those extrapolation formulas from shorter distances indicated that I should be able to run about 10 minutes faster. The reality is that I've bonked in 80 percent of my marathons. In London I went from six-minute pace to 10-minute pace with eight miles to go. It was like driving a disabled car

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Courtesy of the Reisinger Family

▲ Tracy does a double-take just after I run up alongside her in the Trails End Marathon and ask, “OK if I run along?”

on the freeway. In the Comrades Marathon in South Africa (56 miles), I bonked when I still had 26 miles to go! Ouch! So let me tell you, Dad *knows* bonking, and I was able to draw on my familiarity with the survival shuffle and all the encouraging words you tell yourself to make it to the finish.

Interesting thing: of all the characterizations of this phenomenon I’ve read or heard or made myself, Tracy’s description with two miles to go is still the one I think captures it best—“It feels like somebody injected my legs with Novocain.” I could only congratulate her on her simile and add that she was actually fortunate to be enjoying the total marathon experience. (I don’t remember if she appreciated that observation at the time; I suspect not.) In any event, we made it to the finish. (And despite the painful final miles, Tracy has since finished a half-dozen more marathons, including two more—Disney and New York—with Dad.)

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That leaves Marina, the twins’ older sister. The thing about Marina is that she was never a runner in the same sense as her younger sisters. In high school, Julia and Tracy finished first and second in most of their cross-country races. Julia won the state 3,200-meter championship, and both were excellent collegiate runners. Marina, on the other hand, was better at theater and gymnastics; she participated in track and cross-country but was never a star. The highlight of her running career

was winning the conference junior varsity race. But, apparently to make her life complete, Marina decided to run the Portland Marathon.

To put this in context, even her mother, my wife, Nancy, has completed a marathon. I say “even” because Nancy was never able to run at all until, at age 45, she had surgery at the Mayo Clinic to repair major heart defects. And what do you do when you have been a “handler” all your life for a family of runners and are finally able to run yourself, albeit with a new, healthy, but low-horsepower heart? Of course—run a marathon, which she did. Marina accompanied her mom through much of that event, talking her through numerous bad patches, including a downpour, sharp knee pain, calf cramps, and two blister-induced purple toenails. I believe Nancy’s “Never again!” at the finish is one that she will actually stick to.

So you can understand that when Marina made the decision to make it 100 percent for the Reisinger family, there was really no decision to make on my part; I would be there, and it would be—what else?—a surprise.

I made my flight and hotel reservation and entered under a pseudonym, guessing that otherwise when she picked up her bib number at the expo, someone might scroll down the list to her name and say, “Looks like there are two ‘Reisingers’ here, a ‘Marina’ and a ‘Roy,’” and the surprise would be squelched. My very clever (I thought) pseudonym had sort of a Middle Eastern flavor: Mari Nazdad. Say it

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► Marina and Mari Nazdad at about the 20-mile mark of the Portland Marathon.

out loud. Mari Nazdad. Again, but quicker . . . Mari Nazdad. Got it? Marina's dad. Brilliant, huh?


Knowing she would be lining up near the back, I positioned myself toward the front of several thousand participants. The plan was to proceed slowly, surprising her when she caught up to me. This hadn't happened yet after a mile, and I was a road hazard to faster starters, so I stepped aside to just stand and watch for her. (At which time I also surprised her sister Tracy, who happened to be racing also but whom I hadn't told of my presence for fear she might let it slip in conversation with Marina. So this surprise was sort of a twofer.) Well, thousands

of runners passed, and of course I managed to miss her, so I then had to jump back in and work my way up through this throng until I found her.

It was a bit exasperating, but finally, at about five miles, there she was, just in front of me.

I must interject here that the most fun, the thing that really gets your heart pounding and your hands shaking and sweating, is the anticipation of the actual surprise moment. This begins days beforehand. It builds to a peak in the seconds before the tap on the shoulder. If anything, this was even stronger with Marina. So when I made my appearance, it was followed with big hugs and tears and laughs from both of us as the shock and my anticipation all came pouring out.

The rest of the morning was pure joy. We talked the entire way, and Marina (the nonrunner) never even came close to hitting The Wall, finishing comfortably in just under four hours. (Yes, I told her that without bonking she really hasn't had the total marathon experience.)

At Portland, each finisher is announced. So anybody who was listening at that moment knew that the pair holding hands and smiling as they approached the finish were "Marina Reisinger" and "Mari Nazdad." 



Courtesy of the Reisinger Family