

My First 100 Marathons

BY JEFF HOROWITZ

Marathoning is a sport and lifestyle of excess. At least it is these days. Two hundred years ago traveling 25 miles in one day on foot would not have been thought of as excessive, simply because in those days the majority of human beings expended an enormous number of calories just getting through the average day. In Samoa, a spit of land off the Pacific side of Eureka, California, there is a scarlet red cookhouse where lumberjacks used to eat their meals; back in the 1970s and '80s when we regularly ran marathons put on by the Six Rivers Running Club (Avenue of the Giants in May and Humboldt Redwoods in October), we'd occasionally go by the Samoa Cookhouse for a good ole down-home meal, and we'd be regaled by stories of the monstrous breakfasts the lumberjacks would ingest before going out for the day to cut down a stand of massive redwoods. The caloric-intake needed to keep the human furnace fueled closed in on five figures.

Today people burn calories training for and running marathons but still don't approach lumberjackian proportions (and portions), but that are nonetheless impressive to scientists for the bridge to another era when excessive calorie consumption was the norm.

There is today a strain of marathoner who hoovers calories on the way to notching marathons by the handful and who, by that wallowing in excess, bridges us back to a harder time. Marathon maniacs are currently striding the Earth running marathons the way some runners notch 5Ks.

One of our favorite excessive marathoners is Jeff Horowitz, who frequently shares his globe-trotting marathon adventures with readers of this magazine. He's reported, at length, from running two marathons in a week in Italy while also shoveling down carb-rich calories to running near bears in the Alaskan wilderness. His stories are well-detailed, rich in texture, and often filled with little bits of advice about where to stay or where to eat in exotic foreign locales.

When he reached his 100th marathon, Jeff began putting together a book that would share the experiences along the way with fellow runners. But he put in the work to make the book stand on its own; he did not jury-rig it by merely

recounting, one by one, those first 100 marathons. To do so would have put off the most ardent calorie-burning runner after marathon #10.

Instead Jeff fashioned the book as an homage to his 100 marathons, but placed those races, no matter how exotic, in a secondary position to his own awakening to the marathon madness he shares with thousands of other folks who like to spend their weekends running around in public in their underwear.

Jeff's story of his obsession with marathoning works because he is striding common ground with most of us who have heard the siren song of the long race. He doesn't go spinning off into an esoteric screed about the spiritual revelations marathons have provided; there is some spirituality in the pursuit of the 26.2-mile goal, sure, but his story is more down-to-earth, more practical, more grounded. Ten thousand years ago Jeff would have been one of the spear-carriers slogging along for 10 miles to drive the wooly mammoth over a cliff so his tribe could eat instead of a warrior carrying a spear into war. He admits to being a plodder in the sport, but he's modest; he's a fairly good plodder when the starting gun is fired.

And, unlike some of the self-published tomes on "how I ran 100 marathons" (detailed plane ride by plane ride, step by step), Jeff leaps over literary quicksand traps and keeps the narrative moving. It would have been easy, for instance, for him to merely reprint as a chapter one of the stories he wrote for us. But that would have been like tacking Sears siding on a mansion. Instead, Jeff took the time to rework each longer piece into a shorter piece that totally integrated with the style of those chapters not necessarily concentrating on a particular race, but rather on his evolution as a marathoner.

And he doesn't make himself out to be a hero of any sort, that malady of new runners who feel that doing today what was done on a daily basis 150 years ago as men, women, children and animals trekked 20 miles a day along the Oregon Trail, somehow elevates them to an ethereal plane. In fact, he occasionally tells on himself, detailing how he screwed up a race or the logistics of getting to a race. His sense of humor and his sense of irony is always in evidence, which makes him a pleasant tour guide, someone you'd hope to meet in the middle miles of a marathon so you could run a few miles with him.

The entire hundred-marathon-trip provides him, little by little, with the answer to why he runs marathons (pp. 238-239): "It really doesn't matter that I will slow and weaken. There is a kind of glory to be found here, a glory earned through sweat and effort, from a stubborn refusal to give less than your best. It is the reward that dwarfs all the medals tucked away in my drawer. It is why I run the marathon."

The Jeff that started running marathons is not the Jeff that emerges out of the other end. The marathoner Jeff would have been at home on the Oregon Trail, occasionally trotting alongside the horses as they dragged the Conestoga wagon along a rutted road for 20-25 miles a day.

The book does have two shortcomings:

1. There are no photos from these obviously colorful adventures.
2. Either Jeff or his editor obviously felt the book could not stand on its own so they inserted 19 running tips, which are as distracting as are the training regimens appended to Bart Yasso's otherwise excellent autobiography. The book is either an autobiography of Jeff's 100 marathons and what they meant to him, or it's a how-to book; scabbing on the practical stuff merely interrupts a delightful story, the same as in Bart's book.