Etiquette

August 23, 2008

A short while ago a friend of my daughters, Danielle, ran her first iron(wo)man, with a broken arm sustained a couple of weeks earlier in a bike spill. This was an amazing feat. However the highlight of the event was a friend who completed the race and then ran the last eight miles of the marathon route again with Danielle. Now that was very kind, it is an example of very good running etiquette – help your running buddy in times of need. This is the kind of behavior that running buddies should aspire to. So much for the good stuff, this running curmudgeon will now go downhill, so to speak, on to the less than perfect running behavior track.

Because I have a quantitative frame of mind I like to measure goodness and meanness on an ordinal scale with +10 being very kind and -10 being very mean. Jose, Danielle’s friend was close to a +10. We need to add teeth to this scientific measurement, but simple teeth. The unit of measurement should be beer – simply those who exhibit good behavior receive beer and those who act otherwise buy the beer; the actual amount of the transaction should be the difference between the giver and receiver in the giving or receiving of the mean or kind act. For those runners who do not drink beer it will be sufficient to keep a little black book to record the behaviors of their running buddies.

This morning a group of three mountain milers ([www.mountainmilers,com](http://www.mountainmilers,com)) ran along Trail #307 which goes to the top of Spruce Mountain in Prescott Az. The climb along rocky National Forest paths is about 1400’ and the distance to the top is about 5 ½ miles and then you have the choice of going down the steep 4 mile loop to the start or return down the longer, but less steep route. Now the arrangement this morning was very clear – we will meet at the trail head at 7.00am. By about 7.20 I gave up on my so called running buddies and set off along the trail. The debate regarding punctuality of running buddies is long and contentious. How many demerits (beers) should be assessed per tardy minute? I was still fuming curmudgeon-like about an hour later when they caught up with me and escorted me to the top of the mountain. Beautiful views from the fire warden’s tower. Now I consider that this lack of punctuality etiquette should be assessed as being equivalent to 2 beers per person, per quarter of an hour. I have written the same in my little black book. Later in the run, coming down the hill, I took a tumble when my toe caught a rock. I am told by Ken, who was following some 20 yards behind, that my roll was quite gracious; but even if I scored 9.5 for style, my knee, elbow and shoulder paid the price. Blood and grit; it was reminiscent of my wipe out a year ago on a mountain bike race, which resulted in 30 stitches and many scars. It so happens that the other member of the group, Steve, who was some 20 yards ahead, turned at the critical moment and witnessed, through the dense Ponderosa Pines, Ken deliberately reach out and trip me. Now here is where a quick piece of thinking by Ken who did not wish to be charged with ultimate discourteousness faced a dilemma. Should a running buddy in hot dry Arizona give up his water to wash the wounds of his elderly companion? Well he did, and he said some kind words like “watch where you are running you clumsy old oaf” so I feel that he deserves at least one beer to offset against the six pack he lost for being late for the run and the deliberate, albeit debatable, trip. Incidentally Steve gets the ultimate merit score for failure to show up for a Saturday morning long run – he went gold panning!

Should one receive a positive score for being early for an early morning appointment? Picture this scenario. You arrive at 5.15am at the home of your running buddy for a 5.30 appointment. He is still sitting on the John and if you ring the doorbell repeatedly you wake up his wife, who will not be very sympathetic and beat up on her husband mercilessly. Meanwhile he is up and down on and off the John just doing his morning business, because as all runners know, if you don’t get that job done you might find yourself in deep doo doo out on the trail or worse still on the city street. In this case I would consider that 5 minutes early might be polite but any more than that should receive considerable penalties.

After a while my running buddy and I sorted this one out –he unlocked the front door so that I could wait in his sitting room until he was ready. But here is another dilemma. Should one take off one’s muddy running shoes before putting your feet up on the sofa while you wait, especially if the sofa is white? This is where things get complicated. If the wife wakes up at the sound of the door and tip toes downstairs to find your dirty shoes on her upholstery the situation might lead to more than a couple of demerits. Your running career may be over in a flash. On one occasion, because of my early arrival, my buddy had to make a detour into the bushes – he sat on a hornet’s nest. The rest of this story is left to your imagination – it wasn’t pretty. I guess that the demerits for early arrival for an appointment on this occasion should hit the jackpot.

Now I have a very kind running buddy, Garry, who buys running shoes and gives them to me when he has run 50 miles on them or just doesn’t like the color. Over the years I must have had a couple of dozen pairs. In fact I have not bought a pair of running shoes since 1988. This hits at least a ten points (per pair) on the merit scale, but as my shoe person is also tea total, I don’t have to deliver. I did put on a retirement party for him at my house so that helps to redress the balance. Garry, who did a 2.56 at Boston in the wind and rain, will be doing his 100th marathon this year at Detroit. But he is not without fault. On one occasion, at the annual 10k Detroit Turkey trot, we were running together up the zig zag ramp into the Cobo center to the finish, close to a 38 minute time. Garry had the inside position on the last bend, 50 yards from the tape. He (his story is ‘inadvertently’) elbowed me in the midriff, which put me at 38 something while he got a 37 something. That act of skullduggery, in my opinion, warrants substantial penalty. Another great act of injustice was also because of Garry. We were running together, along Hynes Drive, in a 20 mile warm up for the Detroit Free Press marathon. A runner in a group coming towards us said “that’s Garry Watson, he’s a great runner.” And there was I running shoulder to shoulder with him and being totally ignored. This hurt my feelings, so I shouted back “what about me?” Later we finished together in a very respectable 2.18, to be followed by a 3.04 a couple of weeks later in the Freep. But runners should not hurt their buddy’s feelings.

On another occasion this same Garry hurt my feelings again. He needed to beat 3.30 to qualify for Boston and I had already qualified. We had run the Free Press in the middle of October, but he was going down to Columbus to qualify in December. Columbus in December!! I had decided to rest after the Detroit Free Press and so had about seven weeks without running. So half a dozen of us drove, in a Suburban, down to Columbus, OH. Oh, it was cold. I struggled and proved that the “rest theory” was not a viable training method. I saw 3.49 on the clock and mustered up the last grain of energy to keep the dreaded 50 off the result list. Gary and my other GM running buddies (Rick had qualified with a 3.19) were way ahead of me. The Suburban was parked about a mile beyond the finish. It was cold and I was stiff, tired and in great pain. I was not happy. When I arrived at the vehicle they were all sitting comfortably chatting merrily. They opened the door and told me to jump in. I couldn’t. I couldn’t even get my foot up high enough to reach the top of the sill. So I sort of turned and slithered ungracefully into the back seat with great groaning and moaning. All my so called running buddies did was to laugh at my pain. My poor feelings. And to cap it all they said “you’re driving the first leg home.” On reflection I consider that making mock of the unfortunate merits at least 5 demerits.

I must confess that I am not completely clean in my exercise of running buddy etiquette. On one occasion Geoff, a genius in control theory applied to machines, buildings and blood sugar, now at the University of Canterbury, was running at my side around Stoney Creek Park, in Michigan. As usual we picked up the pace in the last mile to show off our talent. But youth and talent are no match for age and cunning. About a quarter of a mile out I selected a way side bush and timed my push perfectly. By the time Geoff had disentangled himself I had a good ten yards on him and arrived at the finish before him. He has never forgiven me. Geoff was often a target for my unkindness. He fancied himself, with good reason, as a soccer player – he played for Case Western. But he was an American and therefore no match for the little Englander who had been born with a football at his toes. Now control theory is all about timing and a little legal shoulder to shoulder push, if well timed when the adversary’s weight is on the wrong foot, can lead to considerable advantage when vying for control of the ball. “Referee” he shouted, but the referee was wise and knew the law. Moving an opponent off the ball, with a shoulder to shoulder charge, while it is in playing distance, is fair. I believe that later Geoff unfairly clipped my ankles from behind in recompense; so the merit / demerit score was a wash, although in football (soccer to you uninitiated) over reaction usually gets a higher penalty.

Young Don from New Bedford MA is a boaster. Now runners are supposed to be magnanimous in victory and gracious in defeat. But not Don. He whines and makes excuses when he loses and acts like a four year old when he wins. He even uses the ultimate excuse of seniority (he is 75) when things don’t go his way. His latest excuse is Lyme disease. I never saw any deer in his yard, but he insists that they must be the source. On one occasion in Providence RI we were running a gentle 5k. I was being kind and pacing an octogenarian when Don came blasting past us singing a victory song. I had to ride all the way back to New Bedford listening to him call all his friends and relatives about his great victory. Now does gloating merit retribution. Yes, if done convincingly, but gently. Don and I ran this 13.2 mile mountain race, somewhere in the mountains of Massachusetts. On the first lap he had the cheek to pass me on the downhill and then take a wrong turn. Kindly I followed him and got the silly old goat back on to the course. I then proceeded to beat him by about half an hour. So I went in, ate the post-race breakfast, showered, changed and met Don hobbling to the finish line with a warm cup of coffee and a few kind words about his incompetence. The long ride home was bliss, except for getting lost – another strong indication of this codger’s incompetence.

Mike is a strange bird. He is a college cross country coach and history professor. He seeks out marathons on the East coast so that he can visit battle grounds. He and I have considerable differences of opinion regarding the rights and wrongs of the Patriots and Loyalists. My considered opinion is that these sneaky Yankee terrorists hid behind trees instead of facing the red coated soldiers of the King face to face. This behavior is almost as bad as runners not waiting when their buddy has to tie a shoelace or criticizing the outfit of their buddies on esthetic grounds. On one occasion we were running along Brewster Lane when a dog came out and chased us. Mike turned, got down on all fours and barked ferociously, and the dog turned tail and bolted. But Mike is a bad loser, a behavior among runners that is unforgivable. We ran the Crim 10 miler together; out of politeness we let a group of gentlemen from Kenya run ahead of us. We should be awarded considerable merits for this unselfishness. Mike and I ran shoulder to shoulder down the cobbled hill in Flint, MI to the finish. The clock said 68. Now I have unequivocal photographic evidence that my outstretched foot crossed the finish line first. All Mike has done for the past 15 years is to complain about the camera angle. On another occasion Mike showed considerable lack of concern for his buddies Garry and me. We were running along Kern Road when he left us without a word. After about 10 minutes Garry and I turned back only to find Mike complaining about falling down a hole and twisting an ankle. In my opinion Mike should a. have not been so careless and b. should at least have told us that he was leaving, especially as I was in the middle of a very interesting story regarding my great performances of yesteryear.

Murph is another one not well versed in running etiquette. It was well established that he ran on the left of the group, Garry in the middle and I ran on the right. But did he obey the unwritten rule to the letter? No. He would change places and put us all out of balance. Murph is a Clydesdale marathon running dentist. He prides himself in his gentle chair side manner and his business acumen. He now works at the Pankey Institute teaching his colleagues how to floss on the run. Now I ask you; is flossing while running with your buddies, appropriate behavior? I think not. Flossing is a very personal activity that should not be performed in public, although it may be permitted in the confines of one’s car on the commute to work. Murph is credited with suggesting a way of saving major corporations and indeed the whole country billions of dollars. Simply insist on three floss breaks a day. On one occasion we took a morning run to the highest point in Michigan so that we could admire the view of downtown Detroit from a distance. The route was a sort of out and back. As I knew the area well, I offered an English short cut home – out of generosity towards my running buddies. It turned out that my English short cut actually added another five miles on to the run, much to the dismay of Murph the Clydesdale dentist. But Murph has youth on his side, and with youth comes speed. He would regularly outpace his elderly colleagues during the track workouts, and gloat unbearably. We would also race the last 30 yards of Dutton Hill, and if I could catch Murph by surprise I could occasionally win the race. The trick is to time your spurt just right, otherwise you will have to listen to an unending lecture of how it is unwise to challenge those with superior youth.

We are supposed to be kind to the fairer sex. But not if they are running buddies. Veronica from Clear Lake TX set herself up as a good adversary. She was quite rude to me on my 65th birthday by referring disparagingly to my age and speed. She often beat me but sometimes I got my revenge. Revenge, if not earned is very sweet. We were running in the Resurrection Run around Nassau Bay when her shoe lace came undone. I gave her some grief, but waited for her nevertheless. Ungraciously she blasted by me at the finish and beat me by five yards. But our tear off slips got mixed up in the chute and I was declared the victor for posterity. Sweet!! Now with two little ones in tow she is still burning up the course. I will have to pull out all the stops and tricks the next time we meet. Veronica is a spirited girl. She organizes the annual BARC pub crawl along NASA Road 1. The rules are simple: start out in a bar and drink a beer and then continue to the East about five miles in an approximately straight line for about five miles, pausing only to drink more beer at each of some 10 bars along the way. The event has caught the attention of many runners in the region and now matches the Rose Bowl parade in its spectator appeal, most of whom have the ridiculous idea that roads are meant for cars, not inebriated runners. Merit or demerit? Your choice.

I really fooled Dan, an ultra dude from Cleveland and a long time running buddy one day. We were running the Boston and I caught him at the 25 mile mark; he was having a bad day as he usually did three hours plus or minus a couple of minutes. I gave him kind words of discouragement when I caught him. Like “come on slow poke, you look like a clumsy hippo”. He whined about blisters and sore knees and things – the usual stuff. Anyway, we saw 3.49 on the clock with about 50 yards to go. He spurted, so I had to do something. I tapped him on the shoulder and said “Slow down Dan, we’re not going to make it.” So he did and I accelerated and beat him by a yard. Sweet!! We have photographic evidence of that event. On another occasion I was handing off to Dan in the Great Lakes relay. We were supposed to just touch hands, but I grabbed his shorts and pulled them down to his knees. Fortunately there were many observers to this unique event. He is still waiting for his six pack of beer as recompense, but I argue that this kind gesture was for the greater merriment of the crowd and so should receive positive merit. Dan writes regularly in Marathon and Beyond – more balderdash like this – it must be catching.

Now Dan invented the stupidity score – a score almost as differentiating as the etiquette score. He may be forgiven however as he is an ultra marathoner. It is well known that too much transmitted vibration to the brain does indeed cause severe damage and so we no more than 26 milers should tolerate some of the bizarre behavior exhibited by such folk. The occasion in point was another Crim ten miler. At the eight mile point Dan found he had a blister. No big deal to us robust runners. Just grin and bear it. But not Dan. He decided to take off his shoes and run barefoot. What do you know? More and worse blisters from the rough Flint roads. So he put his shoes back on again at mile 9 and hobbled home. The question of the removal of clothing, including shoes, during a run, should be presented to the board of governors of running buddy etiquette. Those who take off their t shirts ostensibly to increase the cooling are really exhibitionists who wish to attract the attention of others on the trail. Exhibitionism deserves punishment. Shoe removal may be permitted however, if one has attended to podiatric hygiene and cosmetics. I was once running with a friend, Arline, around Stoney Creek Park when she took off her shoes, and thought nothing of it. Now back in 1981, Arline was selected by South Africa to run in the Olympics, but as you may remember, politics got in the way. It appears that such shoe removal behavior is culturally acceptable in South Africa as the famous Zola Budd popularized the practice. I once decided to emulate the practice – on a Pacific Beach. It is amazing how sand and soft feet don’t get along.

This diatribe is but a small sampling of the challenges faced by overseers of running etiquette. There is considerable debate regarding the scoring system and what should be included in the book of rules. Indeed there are chapters to be written that are diametrically opposed regarding merit or demerit. The penalties are also debatable. Beer or black book? Let the debate continue.