It’s Hard to be Humble

May 8, 2004

There comes a time in the tide of all men when you have to accept defeat like a man. You have to stop gloating and ripping on people and start being, well, just nice for a change. But it’s hard. Here you are in the depths of despond and there ahead of you is this princess of people, this royalty among runners, this sublime star. The day started well enough, cloudy and cool by Houston standards. A short chat with a neighbor putting out the signs for his garage sale, a wave to the local policeman parading our safe streets, the habitual wave at my vintage car still on the hoist in the repair shop. The familiar crowd of selfless volunteers putting out the cones and handing out numbers to the latecomers. Nice people wandering around telling stories of their great successes on the athletic field, and some were great. And some are still great and feature in national rankings at their advanced age. But you are only as good as your next race and that will start in five minutes.

The klaxon roared and off went the crowd of beautiful people, passing, being passed, just finding their pre-ordained order. Being eternally optimistic I passed the one-mile mark in 6.55 to the encouraging words of the volunteer timers and drinks dispensers. “Good job, Brian,” followed almost immediately by “good job Veronica” on pace for her target. Another half mile and we were at the turnaround with the strategic starlet still on my heels. But not for long as the coaching and speed work paid off and she strode ahead like poetry in motion. Oh it is hard to say nice things. The gap widened and my mind turned to the higher realms of literature and how I was to explain this third defeat in a row (if you count the last one where the record is at variance with the facts). I must be magnanimous in defeat, beaten by a better runner, tried my best, but came up short. There is no dishonor in coming second to a symphony of style, strength, stamina and skill.

The end was near, but they had moved it round the corner; an extra fifty yards. The clock read 22.30, a half minute behind my target. The smiling goddess was waiting, radiant with her triumphant 21:45. Being nice to everybody, both the gifted team members and the slow pokes out back. Gracious in her success. Bring on the beer and let us celebrate another milestone. It was the green and yellow that really made the day – the common colors of the Green Bay Packers and Malet Lambert High School, Hull, Yorkshire, England where in my final year I had once before been enriched in mind and spirit by defeat. I had won the pole vault in the city meet, because the event was rudely curtailed when the second competitor broke the only aluminum pole. Off to the state meet where there were only two competitors and the other one was going to start a full three feet above my best ever vault. But second can’t be all that bad. Years of defeat have made me a better person, and every time I am bettered by this swift sylph like strider I feel like a better person.

Oh, it’s hard to be humble.