Mardi Gras

March 1, 2004

Out of the house in Nassau Bay at 6.00 am pick up Jon at 6.15 on to Mark’s for 6.30 and onto the I10 to New Orleans. Great weather, cool, enough cloud to keep the rising sun out of our eyes, light traffic, but plenty of highway patrol, and onto the outskirts of New Orleans by 12.00, with only about five potty breaks for one obsessive pre-race hydrator. Made good time for the 360 miles. Much planning talk. How many ways can someone say let’s run at 6:45 pace, or 8:45 pace as the case may be. Reminiscences of a similar trip two years ago, when that dreaded wall got in the way of that magic number 2 on the results sheet. Lunch time, Piccadilly cafeteria looks good - gumbo, fried catfish and pie; gotta carboload. On down town to the famed French Quarter, with its human statues, sidewalk jazz bands and beads galore left over from last week’s pre lent frivolity. Beads were half price.

Packetpickup with the usual shoes, shorts and shots; foot doctors, race salesmen from exotic places and dozens of people wanting you to put your name and address into a drawing so that they can send you e-mail and snail mail and call you up at dinnertime with offers of three days and two nights in Las Vegas just for sitting through a sales pitch for whatever. New style chips. Fancy. All yellow and Velcro, weighed a ton.

On to the far side of the quarter to visit Mark’s uncle Dale and his wife Deb. They redo old houses, lots of history, beautiful woodwork and fireplaces, blocked up toilet. You’ve got to use the place next door, don’t forget the key, and if the hydrating is still in high gear through the night, you may water the garden. Back down town to the Palm Court Jazz café for dinner, it’s a good job we booked, the place was full by eight o’clock when the resident jazz band began. The place is owned by my friend Nina who grew up just a few miles from where I lived in Yorkshire. Nina is married to the owner of the record company that produces all the famous jazz bands, including Louis Armstrong. Unfortunately, Nina from Yorkshire was not in town, so we had to make do with a fine meal, a couple of beers, more pie, good company and some of the best traditional jazz you ever did hear.

Slept like a log, with only one watering; up at 5, light breakfast and a bit more hydro. Joined the rush of the enthusiastic crowds handing in their warm-ups, stretching and standing in the lines for the portajohns, unless they found their way to the back of the building where there were no lines. Started to chew on a small energy bar and out came a temporary tooth from its implanted pylon. Put it in my pocket at first, but then successfully put it in its intended place, much to the amusement of the surrounding crowds. “Will those who plan to run faster than six minutes a mile come to the front and the slower runners line up according to pace behind”. Unfortunately the cost of three or four pieces of cardboard marked with the expected pace or expected time, either would have been just fine, were beyond the budget, so there was the usual scramble and jockeying when the inaudible starting signal went off after a very harmonic Star Spangled Banner.

The halfers and the fullers ran together along the flat course with lots of outs and backs. The first half dozen runners all had pacers on bikes, I didn’t think that that was allowed. The usual groups sporting purple for Leukemia and yellow for Aids. The GE team were a bunch of pros. Stick to the game plan, don’t go out too fast, don’t waste your energy in the first mile zigzagging past the walkers and Clydesdales who started up front. Wow it feels hard; lead legs. Sun’s getting up, it’s going to be a hot one, so much for a PR and we are only at mile two. The pack is now sorting itself out with familiar faces all around. A fair number of talkers, mostly talking strategy, some about their aches and pains and others about how good they used to be. Color and motivational messages are what marathon running is all about. The mind goes before the legs; just tell that to my legs. Relax, breathe deep, point your thumbs up, don’t slap those feet, drop your arms a little, watch the horizon, not the potholes, that one could be dangerous.

That guy cut me off on the corner – he’s running tangents. Here comes the leader, he’s cooking. Here comes a grunter and here’s one with a metronome. The crowd is in to it big time. Your looking good mister; almost there, ha ha. Bang, bang, bang went the drum, here’s a jazz band and there’s a school band. The first water stop, what is this new stuff – looks and tastes like jungle juice, maybe it’ll make me run faster, maybe it won’t. These cups are too flimsy, they crush and you lose all the contents, must be ready next time. Thank you for being here. You too officer, but don’t let that car across in front of me please, however irate at being late for church. Pretty fancy houses here, round the corner and into the wind, that will cool us down a little. Sun’s getting higher and it’s only mile 3!

Mile twelve, the halfers are sprinting, don’t get drawn in. How’s my split, what’s the chance of negative splits, not today, too hot. Perhaps I should join the halfers, I wonder if they will let me in with this yellow number on. What are you, some kind of wimp or something, giving up half way. You need to get your money’s worth. Run Forest Run. On out of town again, past the above ground cemetery, along narrow car lined pothole filled streets. Around the park twice, dodging dog walkers, bikers, babies in strollers and this old guy swinging his arms like windmills right down the middle of the out and back path. Mile 16, almost there, what’s ten miles? Piece of cake. Here comes Jon, chasing the first woman. Where’s Mark? About ten minutes behind, closely followed by the other Mark of ultra fame. Just think, they will be finished in just over an hour and I have almost two to go. Why am I here? Why do I do this? Never again. Perhaps my best distance is the half. Mile twenty, half way home, the race has just begun.

I still have legs. I can catch that guy in red. That gray hair is faltering, he looks to be in my age group. That girl in blue just passed me again, she walks and runs. Good job; You too. You look older than dirt. I feel old, but I can catch that yellow shirt. Lots of walkers, legs still going, only a short walk through the water stops, get going again. Here comes gray beard again. No way will he pass me. Head up, pump those arms. There’s Macy’s archway. Behind it is the Superdome. And the 50 yard line. A mile to go, keep those 10 minute miles off the clock; there is no tomorrow. Look over your shoulder, the nearest runner is twenty yards back. Mile 26. Home. 3.01 (Jon), 3.09 (Mark) and 4.01 (that’s me). on our stop watches.

Congratulations here’s your medal. Can I help you with your chip? How about some water? Are you all right? Perhaps you should go to the medical tent or the massage place or something. Food sounds better – bananas, rice and beans, swilled down with beer. I feel better already. Get your sweats, change your shirt. Check the results. A milling crowd surrounds three volunteers with lists and pencil and paper. One guy insists he has been short changed. Much heated discussion. “Your awards will be mailed, the results will be on the web site” were the conclusions after half an hour of fruitless haggling. Back to the house for a shower. Thanks for the hospitality, see you next year. On the road. Traffic jam, rain ahead, hungry. Check out the mile spits. Is it possible to have four long miles in a row or did we start slowing down. Let’s stop and try out this diner. Hamburger po-boys.

Monday morning, check out the web site. A first, a second and a ninth in our age groups. Can’t wait for the next one.