Out and Back – Eight and a Half Times

July 28, 2003

The Carrollton, Michigan marathon is one of a kind. This was the fourth running of this unique festival of races. Craig Douglas, the race director and his wife ate dinner with the two Texas visitors, went home for a couple of hours shut-eye, got up at midnight and ran 32k, put the finishing touches to the course, ran another 5k with the 5.00 am starters, gave the runners their instructions and then ran the last 5k at 6.00am with the main group, got a cold shower, welcomed home the finishers and then presented the awards. That’s dedication! The Carrollton Charity Road Races takes place in a township just to the north of Saginaw, Michigan, which grew up as a General Motors foundry town, but which is now branching out into the health care business. Craig Douglas is the township school superintendent, which gives him access to a long list of corporate sponsors and the Bay Area Runners Club – the BARC of the North.

Getting to Carrollton, Michigan from Clear Lake, Texas requires some planning, involving 4.00am, Ellington, IAH, Cincinnati and two terminals at Detroit’s Metro Airport. Better planning would have involved Hobby and Flint. Miraculously, Eileen, Brian’s wife who was on her way out of town to a business trip, met the BARCER duo with a car at the curb outside the baggage claim. 100 miles up to Flint with traffic that outruns that on the Houston freeways by at least 10mph. After all, this is the Motor City and SUVs are meant to be driven. Lack of planning again caused a minor setback – it’s always good to book your hotel room ahead of time, especially when there is a big bike race, one of the few July marathon’s in the country and a big wedding all competing for space. Luckily Lisa’s friend Carolyn had booked a room, but Brian had to search the countryside. As it happened sleep was not easy as the corridors of both hotels were full of revelers. Although, Lisa didn’t awaken from the fire alarm going off in the corridor; it was the room door being opened that finally roused her from slumber at some ungodly hour.

The carbo-loading took place at the Olive Garden, where the two Texans met many of the other out of towners. A Sam Adams (the traditional glass of cabernet sauvignon for one of us!), meatballs and spaghetti hit the spot after a day peppered only by small packets of pretzels. Craig and his wife told us of the origins of this race – modeled on the Sy Mah eight times around a Toledo park jaunt. We learned about the Saginaw and Carrollton multi ethnic community, the generous donors and how to plan an unusual combination of events – a marathon, with two starts, a 20k and a 10k all on the same course. Another 4.30 am rising and on to the high school to set the 5.00 o’clock walkers on their way, meet many 50 staters and wonder whether we could get lost in the dark on this suburban course.

The sweaty Craig gathered together the 100 odd starters and explained that we couldn’t get lost – go along the road, turn left at the crossroads, along another road, around the 2-½ k marker and back again. Repeat 8 times. The first, 2k, lap turned round close to the left turn. Those who had ideas about getting lost were greeted by a full size Dodge Ram at the left turn and a full size Chevy at the turnaround, each accompanied by an imposing character who had a word of encouragement for every runner on every occasion. The Carrollton Bar was on the corner by the Dodge Ram; the volunteer pointed out that it did not open until noon. Too late to help us runners. Now certain elderly competitors were concerned that they would lose count of the laps and perhaps run too far. Not a chance. Half a dozen, even more elderly, veterans, armed with clipboards kept count and were not short of an appropriate word of encouragement. After a few laps the runners and volunteers got to know each other and passed pleasantries, like: “how’s my hair”, “only four laps to go, why are you slowing down?” “It could have been worse, it could have been raining.” The lap counters assured Lisa that her hair still looked fine – even though we all know that running is not a glamour sport!

One runner gave a fine rendering of the “Star Spangled Banner” on his trumpet, the local cleric gave an inspiring invocation and Craig said “Go!” Lisa and Brian set off at a fine pace for the first 50 yards, when one of the two decided that this was not the Lunar Rendezvous Run or even the On the Run Wednesday night leg stretcher. Now on a normal marathon this would be the last time that the two spoke, but not on this occasion. Every lap the passing points on this out and back moved closer to the start until the ultimate humiliation near Brian’s 23 mile mark – lapped by Lisa on her final sprint for an age group second place with a fine 3.39.

The 20k race started with the marathon and this added to the amount of passing - the 100 marathon runners with numbers less than 100 and the 20kers with numbers starting at 300. The 10k started about two hours later – their numbers started at 100 – and their relative speed added to the variety. But the road was wide and after a while the runners came to a gentleman’s agreement on who had right of way on the bends. The two water stops – one at the start and one at the 2k point - were staffed by more cheery volunteers as they juggled the water and gofasterjuice to runners converging at different speeds, some walking through the water stops, from both directions.

After a while you got to recognize most of the competitors and their relative positions compared with the last lap. In most races you only see people who run at your speed but on this occasion you saw everybody a dozen and a half times. There were gazelles and grumpy old goats. Fat ones and thin ones. Fancy shorts and message bearing shirts. Smilers and stony faced strivers. One old character walked swinging his arms from side to side, grunting on every stride. I swear, he was grunting obscenities in Polish. Lisa had met him the previous night in the hotel lobby; his broken English led her to believe he is currently living in Houston …. After a while he began to greet all by passers and after the race he used his camera phone to record the smiling faces of the finishers for posterity.

There were a whole bunch of 50staters and some aspirants, including the Philadelphia flyer, who had run a marathon in Utah three days earlier. (Lisa had introduced the Polish gentleman to the Philly Flier, whom she’d met at several races in the last year, in the hotel lobby. They ended up carpooling to the race and back to the airport! Running makes strange friends a indeed!) Then there was the Hamilton, Ontario guy who had run all the provinces and was now starting on the states. And the lady from Chicago, who worked twelve hour shifts, but had her mind set on doing a marathon. Gordon Bennett hailed from Connecticut and was presented with a tee shirt bearing that name from the proud father of one of the Gordon Bennett Band members Check out the website. And the guy who drafted on his girl friend. And the serious guy who wanted to know what NASA was up to and how it was so important that we went back to the moon as soon as possible.

The only spectators on the course were a family group of supporters with their lawn chairs, a boom box and agile renderings of “YMCA” and Queen’s “We are the Champions.” Their little girl was wearing a tiara, in honor of her birthday. Guarding the cross street here was the only “police” support of the race - a guy wearing regular street clothes and sporting several guns and gun clips. One of us said very nice things to him in passing all 18 times ….. There were quite a few friends and relatives congregated around the start / finish area in front of the high school, who supplied special nutrients to their favorite racers. A pair of Italian Greyhounds received a lot of comment, but the favorite was a small stray kitten that drank coffee from someone’s commuter mug and skipped happily among the runners from time to time.

Students of statistics are welcome to receive a gratis copy of a quadratic polynomial regression analysis, which had a R2 of 0.89. The explanation of this smooth deceleration throughout the race is old age, too much weight and lack of training. The result was a 4.15, which was sufficient to warrant a second place age group medal, just as big as Lisa’s. Roll on Reno in three weeks.

A late checkout got us a shower, some chocolates (See’s chocolates - the champagne came a bit later) and a refreshing change of clothes before venturing back on to the I75 where the pace was stepped up another notch. Back to the airport in time to meet Eileen and then a long slow return to Houston and some good views of the inside of airports. And so to bed.