The Long Wait

September 20, 2003

One Long Wait.

Was it 8:44 or 8:46? That is the question. Put another way: was I technically on time for the 9:15am flight or not? Astute readers will have already guessed from the title that the answer was: NOT! So I got to think about waiting in general and some particularly memorable waits, including this one at the Dayton, Ohio International Airport.

The reason for this exciting location was that the US Air Force 7th annual marathon was held at Wright Patterson Air Force Base yesterday. I was warned that there would be traffic lines at six o’clock in the morning of the race so I dutifully arrived early at the US Air Force Museum where the start and finish lines were. Now coming from Houston I had got out of the habit of taking warm clothes to the start of a race; big mistake. It was freezing, and all I had to wear were a pair of shorts and a singlet. The other 3000 runners had Gortex running suits, hooded sweatshirts and garbage bags. I should never complain about 97 degrees and 97% humidity again, but of course I will. Being at a military establishment, this long wait was accompanied by lots of prerace ceremony and speeches, while I shivered. Relief came at last and off we charged, for two miles into the dark early morning; then came the hill. That slowed our pace down to a more reasonable 8:46 per mile – that ominous number. The sun tried to rise but was hampered by the clouds remaining from the outskirts of hurricane Isabel. As it got lighter we found ourselves running into a thick fog. I was happy that my strategy had not included going out into the lead early on – I had nightmares about taking a wrong turn down the main runway in direct opposition to the fleet of fighter planes that were taking off for their morning jaunt. Eventually the sun won the battle and burned through the mist and the temperature began to rise. We then became thankful for the shade afforded by the tree-lined route. As usual, except for Wellesley College, the middle 15 miles of a race are uneventful; you’ve all been there and done that. Occasionally passing, being passed and conversing with runners of a similar pace. The asymmetry of feet struck me as being particularly interesting. Some toes point forward, some inward, some out to the side and some runners have one of each. This asymmetry creeps up the biomechanical chain to create all sorts of compensations. You can predict the gait variations by the arrhythmic foot slapping and grunting as a transitionally faster runner comes up behind. These analytic wanderings help to pass the time during the long mid-race wait.

I ran with Tom from Kentucky and Ben from Oklahoma from mile 18 to 22. Tom was experienced with hills but Ben was extremely apprehensive about the monster hill at mile 22. We had hardly noticed it on the way out, due to the fog. And it was a strategically placed monster, just like the troll under the bridge of fairy tale fame. The brotherly pact that Tom, Ben and I had made about supporting each other over the last few miles faded like the early morning mist. I charged that troll of a hill with uncharacteristic gusto, telling it that my more tasty brothers were following. Kentucky Tom followed me, but the troll devoured the hesitant Ben. We were greeted at the crest of the hill by a beautiful panorama of the Air Force base and the three enormous hangers that comprise the Air Force museum. Down hill for a mile and a half with a great view of the long spiral of runners winding their way to the finish. Tricky Tom’s caution up the hill paid off; he gave a cheery word of encouragement as he passed me on the downhill leaving me with his blue grass message on the back of his tee shirt. The last quarter of a mile was along an impressive avenue of historic airplanes leading to the welcome arch of balloons. Head up, dig deep and smile for the camera. The clock read 3:54.

For some of you 3:54 might not sound all that impressive, but believe me, the magic 3 was a very welcome sight and the additional 54 would have been sufficient to get me to the Senior Runners podium in a smaller race. But there were three genetically gifted silver striders ahead, who were awarded beautiful Wright Brothers replicas for their efforts. I have to wait a while until the military supercomputers work out the 5-year age group results. Now by this time it is 1:30 and the post-race party doesn’t start until 4:30. I had managed to drive back to the hotel for a shower between the end of the race and the award ceremony so I had three hours to wait. Luckily the free food was provided at the Hope Hotel, which had a sports bar with $3 pitchers to reward the efforts of the calorie-deprived crowd. I had to put up with Ohio State scraping by the less financially gifted Bowling Green, and LSU stopping the over rated Georgia Tech., instead of my favorite Number 1 Oklahoma Sooners putting 59 points on UCLA. The relaxing atmosphere of this wait for the free food to arrive simply had to be filled with a hamburger and fries to soak up the beer. There is nothing like a lubricated wait to encourage in depth analysis of training and racing theories. I had a great conversation with a computer wiz who had the unenviable task of keeping the Nation’s information systems free from infiltration. His greatest fear was not those foreign enemies but rather the bright mischievous college coops who hack for fun, with a bit of inside information.

My biological clock did its job on Sunday morning and I decided to call the airline to see if there was any chance of a standby flight in the morning instead of spending the day at the museum as previously planned. I had seen a lot of the museum earlier in the week with an old friend from the base. “Certainly sir there is a flight at 9:15 and it is under capacity”, said the helpful agent. “Well I’d better hurry”, said I. Packing was easy and bananas and coffee can be consumed on the run. (That sounds like a good name for a running store, I wonder if anyone has thought of it already.) Must keep close to the speed limit - I got a rap on the knuckles a few weeks ago by a nice gentleman with a radar gun on I45. Oh, oh, I have to put gas in the rental car or pay an arm and a leg for the agency to do it for me. Off the slip road and into the filling station only to be frustrated by that inconsistent car company who like to occasionally put the gas filler cap on the passenger side. “No entrance to the freeway”, said the sign. “Tut, tut”, I said. A quick U turn, and back along the road to the ramp. “25 mph”, said the sign at the airport entrance. Wait until the rental car rapid check in girl had dealt with three other carloads of marathoners. “Was everything all right with your car?” she said with a practiced smile. “Yes thank you, gotta run.” Now my watch said 8:44 but the time on the counter display said 8:46 and nobody was behind the counter. A couple of minutes later Lashon James came through the door and gave me the bad news about the long wait. Now Lashon had had assertiveness training and was not interested in quibbling about a couple of minutes here or there. “Fast track through security and keeping open the door of the plane is above my pay grade”, she said, politely. Which reminded me of the occasion when a similar discussion had taken place with a very high ranking company official, with the same immediate result, but a change in company preferred airline rules. Once Lashon had established her unequivocal point of view she bent over backwards to look for alternatives. Places as far away as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit and Newark were mentioned, as also were Delta, Northwest and Continental. She went outside to find a taxi to Cincinnati, but that was going to be $150. Overbooked legs and arrival times in Houston after my originally planned 7:55pm complicated the available roundabout routes. So we settled for the long wait. “Would you like a meal voucher?” said Lashon. “Thank you”, said I. It seems as though food is the common filling for these long waits.

Other Waits

I was impressed by the short wait at the security line, after all it was Sunday morning and the design of the screening services has become much more refined over the past two years. Lap top out, shoes off, cell phone in a tub, jacket in another. “Baggage check!” “Please step this way sir, may I search your bags, there appears to be large solid metal object in there.” “Oh no sir, I am not in the habit of carrying large metal objects onto airplanes.” “Ha, ha! What’s this?” “ It appears to be a large metal object sir, it’s the medal that they gave it to me for running the race yesterday.” “Very impressive, did you have to pay for overweight baggage?”

Now when we analyze the activities associated with flying around the country, we are struck with the fact that most of the time is spent waiting. Even transportation itself is none value added (except to the transporters) and the actual activities in which the transportees are engaged, such as ticketing, security, etc. are very brief. We spend a great deal of our lives waiting. We look forward to the time when we can transport matter, including people, instantaneously. “Beam me up, Scotty.” But until we find a way of decomposing our bodies into mass-less particles and then putting the pieces back in the right order, we will have to deal with the problem of waiting. And the secondary problem of what to do while we are waiting.

Many years ago mathematicians developed queuing theory. Now a queue is what Americans call a waiting line. So I suppose that we could also call the theory “waiting theory”, which may be more descriptive of those informal queues that fill our day, while we wait for something to happen. When I was a young industrial engineer, I took my family to Disneyworld. Six of us in a Suburban from Detroit to Orlando, with Georgina, my 15 year old daughter, getting some driving miles in while she waited for her permit. Now those Disney folks understood queuing theory, they get plenty of practice. So I activated my running stop watch. I found the average length of a ride to be less than 2 minutes and the average length of a wait to be about an hour, never less than half an hour and sometimes more than two hours. So good old Walt invented Mickey Mouse to entertain the families while they waited in line. The logistic question was: how many Mickeys do you need to entertain all the queues with no two Mickeys being visible at the same time from any single location, because of course we all know that there is only one Mickey Mouse. Unfortunately, because of the length of the slow moving lines, the no two visible Mickeys from any one place was a problem, so the inventive Walt had to invent surrogate Mickey’s and use them to make money. So he invented ice cream and candy-floss at $2 a time and made everybody happy, including his shareholders.

The mathematics of queuing theory is not too difficult, as long as you have random arrival and service times that can be represented by the Poisson and Exponential distributions. Many organizations from banks, through supermarkets and doctors’ offices, to transportation planners have used this theory to good effect to balance the waiting times of customers and service resources. The problem arises when we have to deal with complex organizations that have many interacting queues. Like airports, manufacturing plants, distribution centers and race planners. So the technology folks harnessed the power of computers to the theory of queues to allow us to simulate the behavior of complex organizations. Now we can not only simulate a just in time delivery system for manufacturing plants, we can also plan a marathon or 5k, with sufficient service activities so nobody has to wait an unreasonable amount of time, except at the water stops and for the results to be posted.

When marathons became popular the problem of 50,000 people crossing the starting line at the same time became expensive and the alternative of having then all stand waiting in line, albeit 10 across, became intolerable to those competitive souls who only dream of 5 minute miles. So they invented “the chip”. To err is human; if you really want to make a mess of things, use a computer. The cautious race directors use belt and braces – they use the chip and the bar coded tear off strip. And the results don’t always match, so we have to introduce the “trouble table”, staffed by gentle grandmothers. Now computers and chips can work most of the time, with instantaneous communication of the runners’ split times on the Internet in real time. Chips work because they are faster than people at doing all that is necessary to get information from one foot to another eye. But chips have to be taken off the feet, if they are rented. So we form another queue while another patient grandma unties our triple knotted shoelaces and redeems the chip. And then another queue, while we wait for the nutritional replenishments, and another one for our bag of clothes, and one for the massage tent and one for the shower and one for the parking lot and one for the traffic lights and one to return our rental car and then all of those airport queues.

So what am I doing during the second half of this long wait from 8:45am to 6:10 pm? Well I waited for my free hamburger to be cooked, courtesy of Lashon and Continental Airlines, who recognize that people are only so tolerant of waiting and that when the waiting time becomes too long people need entertainment or food. Now Dayton is only a very small international airport and the airlines do not provide lounges with free food and drinks for their waiters. The commercial sector takes over, with shops full of magazines, books, luggage, tee shirts and other trinkets, just like the Disney ice cream – a great way of making money while people are waiting. Another time filling entrepreneur - Bill Gates - invented the Word. This irritating, grammar and spell checking rascal allows waiters like me to spend their time sitting next to a power outlet with their lap top typing as fast as their fingers can go. This assessment is not quite true. I grew up in the pre computer age when only girls learned to type so that they could become secretaries who transcribed the wisdom of men. Nowadays men have found that they need to type. Even though I only put two fingers to work on the keyboard this is sufficient to keep up with the speed at which I can think up this gobbledygook. We are close to the time when computers can understand our voices and translate our utterings into sensible text. We are already used to wandering cell phone talkers; some runners even call in their splits during long races. The next step is for Bill Gates junior to develop a machine that translates our thoughts into hieroglyphics that are much more efficient than common language. All in the pursuit of reducing waiting time. Now simulate that!

“What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare;

No time to stand beneath the boughs and stare as long as sheep or cows. No time to…….” I forget the rest and even the author. (I checked the Internet - it is “Leisure” by William Henry Davies, written in 1911)

Time and tide wait for no man

An old adage in ergonomics and industrial engineering is that people, being the most expensive resource and the most impatient, should not have to wait for machines. Do you remember the early days of computers in banks, where the customers stood in line while the teller typed in the information needed for a transaction and then tapped her fingers for a couple of minutes while the bits and bytes did their thing. Clever tellers were able to entertain the customers during these waits by asking about their families and providing important weather bulletins. In those days simple queuing theory was sufficient to predict maximum queue length and waiting time. Since that time there has been an escalating battle between software and hardware over nanoseconds. Hardware has provided increasing speed, while software has become increasingly greedy, spoiled by the available hardware. In the good old days of (FORTRAN) programming we had to respect processing limitations and program accordingly.

When I was a little boy I stood in line on Saturday nights at the village fish and chip shop, while Mrs. Barker used her boiling lard to create the most delicious meal that ever was, wrapped in readable newspaper. Those in line were entertained by conversations about the success or otherwise of Hull City - the local professional football team. A similar situation was played out in the late afternoon in Mr. Mills’ kitchen where we waited to have our hair cut. These lines provided an important educational opportunity. Now we have fast food. Do we ever discuss the meaning of life in a McDonald’s line? Are the time managed French fries as tasty as Mrs. Barker’s? But the technology of hair dressing has not progressed and is still a predominately manual business. So barbers and hair dressers shops are still a refuge for those who are happy to talk while they are waiting for something to start or finish.

The worst kinds of waits are those for the postman bringing you your exam results or the results of a job interview. In the former case of exams, the magical multiple-choice technology can give you instantaneous feedback of your ability to be a doctor, engineer or lawyer or at least to qualify for attending school to learn about these prestigious professions. But the business of job assignment has not caught up, because people are still involved. First there are the screening interviews and shortlists, then the background checks, then the extended interviews and pseudo aptitude tests. Then there are the meetings and more meetings, before the boss exercises his wisdom, based on the universal theory that Votes = Opinion times Salary. During this extended wait, all the good candidates drop out and take other jobs while the less good candidates enter a lottery, fueled by the halo effect. Did the candidate use the correct fork for his soup? These kinds of waits are tests of stamina and the ability to remain patient however long the delay caused by your file sitting in a queue on some busy person’s desk. The strong get on with their lives, the weak worry. Runners just go out for a run, and worry?

Killing Time

I was walking along the airport corridor to stretch my still stiff legs when I bumped into the waitress from the restaurant where I had spent my courtesy lunch voucher. She recognized me. “You’ve got a lot of time to kill” she said. “All day” I replied. “Time for another hamburger” she quipped. “No thanks I have run out of vouchers”. I have a daughter; she lives in New York. Last year she ran her first marathon, and beat me. But I have beaten her time three times since. The showdown is in a couple of weeks, in Detroit. Caroline used to go to grad school on the New York subway and had a lot of long waits. So she took up knitting and attracted a lot of interest. The interest was such that she could make hats and scarves and mittens for $20 each which meant about $15 profit if you don’t count her time. I said that she should have been improving her mind or doing her homework or something useful. Sometimes even fathers get it wrong. She even sold a batch of stuff to her sister for $120. Now the gate area is filling up and a lot of people, some yesterday’s survivors, are killing time. Ten are reading books, one knitting, two actually reading the small print on their tickets and most of the rest are just fidgeting, scratching, chewing, or looking at other people killing time. Others have their lap tops going, one with solitaire, one filling out his expense report and one reading his e-mail. One youth has a Gameboy, he is wearing an OSU sweat shirt. Five are talking on their cell phones – I already called all my family to tell them the exciting news about the state of my legs. There really are a lot of scratchers, nose scratchers, ear scratchers, wrist scratchers. Two are sleeping, must have been a long day yesterday. Every now and again one of the waiters gets up and goes for a walk, just to stretch his legs or go to the bathroom or look around the bookshop, with no intention of buying. That one just put down his cell phone ate a handful of popcorn and delved into a crossword puzzle. He looks like a runner – may guess is that he did about 3:30, that old guy over there probably did about 5 and a half hours. That hundred pound girl probably broke 3 hours. The plane has arrived at last. Tatty bye.

And then I sat for three hours by the window in a small commuter plane next to a 300lb guy who attacked my ribs with his ample elbow, and the seat in front of me was reclined all the way. Waiting in these transportation tubes is a pain, especially with stiff legs.

So what do you do between the beginning and end of a training run? Do you concentrate on good form and measure your quarter mile splits? Or do you hum a popular tune in time with your stride? Or do you plan or replay your day? Do you write the great novel or invent the next generation time saving machine? Or do you wish you were home eating breakfast. Or do you exaggerate the possibilities of the pain in your knee? Sometimes I runs and thinks and sometimes I just runs.