Ugly Running

April 2004

The 2004 Boston Marathon was an ugly race that stimulated this dissertation on the ugly things that surround us. But there would be no such thing as beauty or elegance if it weren’t for ugly, so ugly has its purpose. Often the expression “ugly” is applied unkindly to people, but an unknown sage once said: “In nature there’s no blemish but the mind, none can be called disabled but the unkind”. Lady Astor received a more direct response to her accusation: “Mr. Churchill, you are drunk,” to which the prime minister replied. “Madam, I may be drunk now, but tomorrow morning I will be sober and you will still be ugly.” This historical analysis of ugly would not be complete without Hans Christian Anderson’s ugly duckling, which turned out to be “a very fine swan indeed.” Ugly depends on your point of view. Every baby is beautiful, even a baby warthog!

The 2004 Boston Marathon was run in 85-degree weather and this caused a lot of ugly running, if you count walking up the hills as being ugly, and staggering, and collapsing and almost dying. Even the times were ugly – the median time was almost 20 minutes slower than last year. But out of this ugliness came forth beauty. Dig deep, the pain is temporary, the glory is forever. Airfare ugly, hotel prices ugly, a Boston finisher’s medal, priceless. The runners sweated and their faces took on a universal ugly strained stare, but the spectators loved the warm weather and, with happy faces, called out encouraging clichés at every step of the way: “You can do it”, “You’re looking good”, “You’re almost there”, “The Sox beat the Yankees”, “Only one more hill”. They played motivational music on their boom boxes: “We are the champions”, “Rocky”, “Chariots of fire”; a more fitting song from yesteryear would have been “Keep right on to the end of the road”.

The pre-race “expo” provided a lot of material for the ugly theme. The most ugly of all is the ugly advertising and advice that is provided gratuitously to the masses of athletes who will grasp at straws to gain a couple of minutes, despite heredity and the elegant laws of physics – it takes more energy to move a big mass a long way than it does to move a smaller mass. But the Boston marathon has a net downhill and there was a big back wind all the way. Age and treachery is no match for youth and talent. Fancy shoes and highly processed materials from hard bars, through non-Newtonian goo to volatile liquids loaded with goodies are ugly substitutes for training. But this logic does not deter the merchants who are out to make an ugly dollar at the expense of the mass of beautiful dreamers who check their brains at the door. Perhaps the biggest lie is the clothing fashion lie and the prices that go with it. It never ceases to amaze me that people who have the talent and dedication to qualify for Boston still feel that it is important to look good while they are doing it. But in their defense I have to admit that a friend of mine who has completed a few “Ironman” races and Bostons once told me that I was the worst dressed runner that ever disgraced the race course.

Perhaps the ugliest features of this sales blitz are the lines offered by the salespeople. We were walking by one booth when the salesman called out “Which of you two is the smartest?” (He really meant smarter, but ugly grammar goes with the territory.) We simultaneously pointed to each other as we sat down to complete a survey on the history of the Boston Marathon. We both scored 100%, with a bit of collusion and help from the salesman, who then offered his sales pitch when we were in a receptive frame of mind. But we resisted and moved on only to hear “Which of you two is the smartest?” aimed at a couple of runners walking behind us in the isle. Next we came across the guys with the rolling pins who were emphatic that these gadgets would cure everything from rheumatism to bad running stories. And then there were the diet supplements with big labels and small print presenting a list of chemicals greater than all possible combinations of the inhabitants of the periodic table. The purveyors of these potions had big beautiful smiles that camouflaged their ugly intensions of poisoning the whole running community.

An enterprising business student from Colorado was conducting a survey of the type of shoes that people would be wearing for the race. She also collected race numbers and a few other demographics, so with a little bit of computer crunching she will be able to find out which makes of shoe go faster on which groups of runners. My reply to her question on shoe make was an honest “Garry’s”. She said that she had never heard of them, so I explained that Garry was my long time running buddy from Michigan who gave me his cast offs. I have not bought a pair of shoes for ten years and probably have enough to last me another ten. Garry and his friend Mike once bought five pairs of running shoes each at a Boston fitness expo, perhaps because of the ambience and perhaps because of my surreptitious encouragement as the eventual recipient of shoes with between 10 and 300 miles on them. Shoe technology is less of a science than some salespeople would have you believe.

The decisions that people make in the face of uncertainty can be very ugly. Shall I buy that jacket or the other one, why don’t I buy both? After all this is my first Boston and I’m sure I’ll make good use of all that warm clothing down in Houston. What about that beautiful poster commemorating the race? It will go well with the other dozen that I have still rolled up in their tubes. (I fell for that one, again.) Perhaps I need a new watch with GPS so that I will know just where I am on my morning run around my neighborhood, in the dark (when I can’t see the dial without stopping). The Reverend Thomas Bayes, a couple of hundred years ago, described a theoretical method by which information could be amalgamated sequentially to allow convergence on one opinion or another. But even though he was a man of the cloth as well as a mathematician, his theorem did not account for human frailty in decision-making. Since that time many psychologists have addressed the various factors that coalesce to cause ugly decisions, like primacy and recency effects and the famous “halo” effect in which one item of evidence dominates human decision-making. Sometimes this item of evidence is of minimal relevance in the long run, but momentary madness often wins the day.

Ugly is a perception and the initial perception of a visitor to Boston is that it is an ugly city. All you see from the taxi window is ugly traffic, road works and half demolished buildings, not at all like the tourist brochure shows you, with shots of Harvard yard, the river, the Big Dig and the key sights on the Freedom trail. The subway or T as they call it is ugly, but mainly because it is old fashioned and beaten up by lifelong service to the millions who wish to avoid the traffic, and the Boston marathoners who wish to avoid the ugly taxi fares. Perhaps my perceptions are biased because I come from the beautiful city of Detroit, where, unlike Boston, the roads go East and West and North and South and are numbered 8, 9, 10 and so on so you always know where you are, unless you actually live or work in Detroit and learn to navigate around the lower numbered roads. The Detroit marathon is beautiful, because I ran my best races there. It goes over the bridge to Canada, along the river with a view of downtown Detroit, back under the bridge around Belle Isle Park for six or seven miles and then back through well-kept neighborhoods to a finish on the 30 yard line of the spanking new downtown Ford Field. Unlike Boston, Detroit also has half decent basketball and hockey teams and right now the Tigers have the best start in living memory. And of course Detroit makes beautiful cars and trucks to adorn the driveways of America and around the world. But the jobs of putting these cars together are not beautiful – 45 second cycle times and awkward postures for a lifetime compensated for by plenty of overtime and hourly rates better than most production lines – like those putting together the components on a ten second cycle time in Mexico or those cutting up the chicken you ate last night on a two second cycle time. Work is often ugly.

At the start of this essay, I noted that your mother doesn’t think that you are ugly. Unkind people may say that you are to make an ugly point, and often you look in a mirror and wish that you looked like a movie star. So off you go to the cosmetics counter, the hairdressers, the clothes shop, the shoe shop, the diet supplement shop, the weight watcher’s shop, the liposuction shop, the Botox party and if you are lucky you can get an extreme makeover. Soon there will be genetic engineering to allow everyone to be beautiful. But without ugly there is no beauty. Runners are often admonished that without pain there can be no gain. But often the pain is greater than the gain and the less genetically blessed end up telling stories about how good they used to be and not how good or ugly their next race will be. It is said the runners never smile. One enterprising runner ahead of me contradicted this misperception with a smiley face on the back of her shorts. It is true that runners don’t always smile like divas at the Oscars. But when they pass on the trail in the mornings they always smile, except at those bicyclists who ride two abreast and hog the whole pathway or those car drivers who believe that the road belongs to them.

Feet are ugly, especially runners feet adorned with bunions, blisters, calluses and fungal growths. Feet also feel ugly after a long run of fighting the asphalt and hi tech appointments of hi priced shoes. Feet are also internally ugly with fasciitis, heel spurs, nervous nodules and the lumpy remains of sprains gone by. Once at Boston, I sprained my ankle halfway down the hill in Hopkinton – a punishment for taking a leak in the woods because the porta john lines were too long. By the end of the race my ankle was beginning to bloom into a black and blue football. Some people think that feet are beautiful, particularly podiatrists who turn foot deviations into gold and shoe makers who not only make running shoes but the most impractical, painful and ornate flimsy devices that adorn the feet of the fairer sex. Even hardy runners occasionally wear insensible shoes and paint their toe-nails, or what’s left of them after the daily battle with the toe box of their sneakers.

Feet and shoes can also be accessorized to enhance their ugliness. Runners have rings for their fingers and rings for their toes, ears, navels and so on; they also have bracelets for their wrists, necks, waists and ankles. Shoes come with all sorts of fastening devices, some of which are as simple as Velcro and others that are called laces, which are often beyond the capability of even experienced runners to fathom out and tie securely. Cautious runners add tags to remind them who they are, who to call in the case of an ugly incident with a truck and what ugly medical conditions they have so that the ER doctor can get a head start. Even race organizers have capitalized on the foot to manage their races through the addition of a chip. Mostly this chip gets things right and sometimes turns a very ugly race time into an almost respectable net time. The most beautiful time of the race is when the runner sits down on a chair and puts his foot up on a stool to have the chip removed by the wonderful volunteer who then rewards the happy soul with a medal. I believe that these chip removers could write riveting stories about the ugly feet they have serviced, especially those with double knots.

If you think that new shoes are ugly, try looking at old shoes for a while. Worn down heels and toes that allow the analyst to diagnose why your back is out of kilter. But old shoes can be beautiful, especially if you know Margot Montgomery. She collects old running shoes and other items and distributes them to homeless people in Houston. Being homeless is ugly, especially in the affluent United States, but old running shoes can be beautiful especially if they are all you have.

Running styles range from the elegant to the extremely ugly. The winners turning on the heat in the last few miles look as effortless as gazelles, and go much faster for 26 miles than we mortals can go for 26 yards. Ugliness increases as the race goes on and hits its peak in the Newton Hills. Gait ugliness is characterized by asymmetry. I succumbed to the ultimate temptation of ordering video clips of my progress through key points in the race. The camera never lies. I wait with baited breath to observe the escalation of ugliness of running style as the race progresses. Perhaps crabs think that other crabs gliding over the sand hunched up and sideways are beautiful, but the same is not true for runners. The most striking change is that the head goes down and focuses on the placement of the next stride rather than the horizon as the coach always told you. Then there are the elbows – another ugly appendage – that flail inefficiently in circles at various heights above the waist. Foot-slappers are ugly and tired. Some feet go forward and others take a roundabout route to get to their destination. When they hit the ground, sometimes heel first and at others more towards the mid foot region, the rocking and rolling really starts. Sometime toes point out to the side, asymmetrically, and the medial arch collapses like a squashed tomato. The foot doctors and shoe sellers love these discrepancies in the form of the lower appendages. They have high priced solutions to nature’s variation.

Some people say that old is ugly, but what about the castles of Europe or the pyramids or the hanging gardens of Babylon or all those other symbols of affluence in days gone by. What about the thousands of silver striders and competitors in the Senior Games? Just picture the smile on the face of an eighty year old who just won the 5k or the ninety year old who threw the javelin further than he could see, or Johnny Kelly, singing “Young at Heart” to the crowd of Boston marathoners assembled on the playing fields of Hopkinton High School. The ugliest thing about being old is being ignored, by young folks who make ugly decisions. Disease is ugly, because it is nature’s way of making people pay for what they do to nature. War is ugly because it kills and maims many people for no useful cause. Failing to achieve a good time in the Boston Marathon or even failing to finish at all because of the heat, is beautiful, because you tried. After all being able to run is beautiful.