

***A Perspective***  
***by Tara Martin, '96***

How I ever got myself into running a marathon, I'm not really sure. As far as I can tell, my ego once again got in the way of better judgment. But I really blame my crazy Aunt Martha for putting me up to it. Last May, I hadn't been at her house more than two hours when she sat down next to me, slapping a manila envelope onto my lap.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Our next big adventure." She replied.

With that catch phrase, I groaned and sank deeper into the couch. The last "big adventure" with Aunt Martha had involved a double black diamond ski run affectionately named "Hell's Gate." While she gracefully sailed down the run in perfect form, I had turned myself into a giant human snowball after my skis hit bare rocks.

"I still have scars from the last demonic ski hill." I whined. "I told you I'm not skiing with you anymore!"

"Fortunately for you, it's not skiing. Beginning today, we're going to start training to run a marathon."

"Perfect!" I said with my usual sarcasm. "Excuse me while I go send another down payment to my orthopedic surgeon." Not two years earlier, I had finally gathered up the courage to fix one problematic knee. As the medication wore off, I vaguely remember my surgeon advising me to be moderate with my exercise and to "not mess up his fine work."

"Your knees are better now." She replied confidently. "You've been running again for months. Just look it over."

I sighed and opened the envelope knowing she was right. Trying to retire from athletic competition was similar to the time I had tried to give up caffeine. I had just felt cranky all the time. Recently I had entered a few 5Ks just to feel human again. Although I would never admit it, Aunt Martha knew the idea of running a marathon would be oddly appealing to me. We both loved a challenge, and over the years we had been partners in crime for some pretty crazy stunts. I scrutinized the information and looked up at her.

"The Athens marathon? You want to do a marathon in Greece?"

"Exactly. It's the original marathon course."

"Didn't the first guy die doing this?"

"Yeah, but he was barefoot and had just come back from fighting a war. We definitely have the advantage here."

"Hmmm. When is it?" I asked.

"Six months from now. November 7th, 2004."

Coincidentally, the 26.2 mile race fell on my 26th birthday. Since I had entered my twenties, I had preferred to let birthdays slide under the radar. Birthdays had been somehow earmarked as days to reflect on the progress of my life. Each November 7th, I tortured myself trying to figure out what it was exactly that I had accomplished in the past year. Inevitably, my mind would wander to mistakes I had made, and how much my course had drifted away from what I had envisioned for my life. My family loved to tell me that it was just a bad case of the twenty-somethings curse. At age 25, I had finally begun to move again with purpose, yet I still felt like I was floating from one day to the next. I knew that birthday number 26, the looming official transition from early twenties to late twenties, would likely be another day where I'd just want to stay in bed. Suddenly the idea of doing something outrageous and masochistic was exactly what the doctor ordered. Besides, all of this had to be a sign. I realized that I needed to do this race just to have a real goal again.

"Okay. I'm in." I casually told my aunt.

"Really? Was it that easy to convince you? I'm disappointed at your lack of cynicism."

"Well, why waste it all now. You'll get your fill by the end of these six months."

And so, we began training for our marathon. The fact that we had agreed to train together was a bit ridiculous. First of all, 3000 miles of geography separated us. Secondly, Aunt Martha had been running her whole life. She was as built for distance running as I had been for distance freestyle, so I couldn't come close to her pace times. But we supported each other, each competitively trying to top the other's mileage from the day before. We spent an hour each Sunday on the phone recapping our aches and pains, how many hills we had done, and how many hours we had run. We watched together (in fear) the Olympic marathons during the summer, carefully analyzing the course and mentally noting the exhaustion of the elite athletes. Onward we trained until the day finally came that we boarded the plane for Greece.

"We're really doing this!" exclaimed my aunt.

I was excited too, but had already begun to over think the race. As a former collegiate swimmer, I'd done my share of competition, but I was particularly nervous over this event. In swimming, the distance I raced was trained over and over. By the end of my season, I knew exactly how I would feel during every yard of competition. The chances of injury in a pool are slim during the actual race event, and I always knew that no matter what happened, I would always be able to finish a race. Twenty-six miles, on the other hand, was something intangible. The longest run I had trained had been three hours, and I knew my pace time with hills would put me running on race day closer to five hours. All those years of experience swimming seemed of little help to me now.

I woke up early on the race morning. I sat stretching in the dark hotel room, thinking about the upcoming event. My mother woke up shortly thereafter and wished me "Happy Birthday." My mother had never shared my love of competition or sports. Most of the time I figured she just looked on in bewilderment, trying to figure out how exactly it was that we were related. But the fact that she was there to support me meant that in some way and on some level, she had finally grown accustomed to my warped ambitions. In recent years, her support had meant the world to me.

"Well, are you ready for this stunt?" she asked.

"No, but it's now or never."

"Just promise me you won't be your usual stubborn self if you get injured. I'd prefer to not have to haul you home on a stretcher."

"Thanks Mom...I'll remember that."

Aunt Martha knocked on the door. We were ready to go. We took a cab down to Panathinaiko Stadium. It was the same stadium where the Olympians had finished, where we were to finish, and I suppose where if legend were correct, Pheidippides himself had dropped dead of exhaustion. From the stadium we caught a bus to Marathon, the official starting point of the race. The ride was a slow and quiet one, tracing the path that we were to run. I nervously looked around the bus at all the different runners from around the world. Some slept, some chatted, but most stared straight ahead taking in the hilly course that awaited them.

We arrived at Marathon nearly an hour and half before the race started. My aunt and I stepped off the bus and were shocked at how the temperature had dipped. It was easily 40 degrees and everyone was freezing in their running shorts. There was no place to get warm, so we stuck close together shivering in the darkness. At mile zero...the mood fitted the atmosphere. It was a cold, dark place full of strangers. I must have looked scared and clueless because a few English speaking runners came up and started giving advice. I felt like a child...here I was in a new environment with nothing but the guidance of a wave of runners around me to point me in the right direction of home.

After what seemed like an eternity, we were ready to line up at the starting line. I had never been so eager to begin a race. Just so I'd have some blood flowing down to my toes. Aunt Martha had her

tunes cranked to full volume, as did I. A runner walked up to me and asked in a European accent, "Chili Peppers?" I smiled and nodded. Music really is the universal language.

With the sound of the gun, we were off and running. Aunt Martha quickly skirted through the pack of slower runners and within six minutes had left me in the dust. The course began slow paced and flat. I wasn't complaining, everything was exciting and before I knew it, I had jogged three miles. At this point I looked at my watch and decided that my pace was a bit slow, so I figured I could add some speed. Onward I went, leaving the pack behind.

For a few miles I was in a total state of bliss. I felt great and was sailing ahead of everyone. I was even enjoying my fudge gu pack like a little kid eating a pudding snack. Everything seemed right in the world as the Greeks lined the streets clapping and yelling "Bravo!"

I was on some sort of subconscious cloud when suddenly something shocked me back into reality. A man had fallen to the ground, clutching his chest. About three of the spectators were trying to get him to the sidelines. It was obvious he was having a massive heart attack. He was still breathing, but he was slipping out of consciousness. I looked around to see if someone had called an ambulance. I felt completely helpless and amidst mass confusion as more people gathered around the man. People were elevating his legs and seemed to know what they were doing, so I decided to run ahead for help. I knew that someone had to be parked near the 10km mark (less than a mile away) as the race info had advertised. I sprinted ahead and thankfully a few more people had the same idea. Together we found an ambulance parked off to the side of the course. I couldn't believe we had beaten them to the call. We were all trying to tell the drivers "heart attack" in about four different languages. In the end, pounding on your chest and pointing seemed to have been an easy sign to interpret. The ambulance quickly crossed the course and drove back in the direction of the man.

I'm not sure what I felt those two minutes afterwards, but I slowed down to a walk and tried to collect myself. The shock of seeing a man near death on the course at only the 9km mark does not do wonders for your race mentality. But soon as more and more runners passed me, I decided the only thing to do was to push the drama aside and get back in the game.

I raced on ahead and slowly the crowd thinned out. Contrary to popular belief, the original marathon course is devoid of ancient ruins and historical landmarks. The paved road winds past businesses and fast food chains, yet has some beautiful rolling hills in the background. Despite the Americanization of Greece, there is hardly a billboard to be found in English. Each mile marked signs I couldn't read and terrain I'd never seen. It was almost as if I were on a different planet. After about an hour and a half, I had reached the point where I couldn't feel the pavement. At this point, I felt as though I was floating from hill to hill. There are no words to describe the feeling as your body transforms itself into a weightless machine. After another hour, however, I realized that all such feelings of invincibility must abruptly come to end.

Around the 17 mile mark, I began to feel the pavement again. All of the sudden, each mile took an eternity to complete. The novelty of tangerine gu packets had worn off, and I was desperate for real food. At mile 18, I wanted to be at mile 19. At mile 19, I felt worse, and could hardly wait to get to mile 20. On this pattern went until mile 22, when I could barely hobble down the course. It was as if the years of my life were matching this stupid race. During each year as of late, I had looked forward to the next year, thinking it had to be better than the last. At year 22, I wouldn't have cared if someone had taken me out the race all together. I would have welcomed any exit from the chaos. It had been the height of my life's uncertainty up to that point. I had no answers as to my life's direction.

My thoughts drifted to the Brazilian Olympian who had been leading the Athens men's marathon until someone pushed him off track. It was at this very mile and moment that I understood what this athlete still managed to accomplish. He had picked himself up and finished with a medal, never complaining over his loss of gold. Thinking of him, and of my family and friends cheering for me, I pushed forward. Soon I found myself in another level of consciousness where I still felt pain, but it was tolerable. I certainly wouldn't have called myself "invincible" at this point, but at least I was putting one foot in front of the other. The miles got better...24, 25, 26. I rounded the familiar street and looked up to see a crowd of supporters in the ancient stands. I entered the stadium and put all my efforts into one last sprint to pass as many people as I could. Aunt Martha. Mom. and my uncle were all waiting at the end. I

crossed the finish line just under 4 hours and 45 minutes and collapsed. A man came over and hung a medal around my neck and I grabbed the hands of my family. As always, they were there to pull me to my feet.

So that is how I came to run a marathon on my 26th birthday. Just as with life, it began scary, cold, and dark. The rolling course was marked by tragedy and pain, but also with moments of enlightenment, happiness, and glory. Encouragement came from all angles along the way. I feel so fortunate to have been given the opportunity to run. To do your best, you must find your own pace, your own rhythm, and mark each milestone not as one step closer to the finish, but as an accomplishment in itself.

"So what's our next big challenge?" asked my aunt.

"I don't know." I replied, "I'm sure it will be big, but I'm thinking it may take longer than a year to figure it out."