

Training for the marathon

Thanks to Pheidippides, my body has been aching since making good on my New Year's resolution.

You see, Pheidippides was the Greek soldier who ran 26 miles from Marathon to Athens without stopping to announce that the Persians had been miraculously defeated at the battle of Marathon. What sometimes gets left out of the story is that he died from exhaustion right after announcing "We were victorious!"

In case you haven't heard the awesome news, the Pittsburgh Marathon is returning this year on May 3 — after a six-year hiatus. The Pittsburgh Marathon is not just any marathon. Our hilly geography makes it one of the toughest. After crossing the Birmingham Bridge from the South Side (around mile 12), running up Forbes Avenue into Oakland is famously brutal.

Surprisingly, thousands of people are expected to turn out and run this amazing distance. After completing the Pittsburgh Marathon 12 years ago, I swore I would never be that crazy again. But I've been pounding the pavement along the picturesque country roads of Jefferson Township through rain, sleet and snow ever since the turn of the new year.

I put Pittsburgh Marathon runners into four categories. There are elite runners from around the world who are simply unbelievable. Then there are the well-conditioned, tri-state-area runners who run the marathon effortlessly. Then there are the young, less well-conditioned athletes who struggle a bit along the way but their youth serves them well and they make it with minor aches and pains. Finally there are the crazies. These are the people with questionable ability but who persevere



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against all odds to prove something to themselves and those who surround them.

Count me among those in the last category. Our goal isn't really to complete the marathon in a certain period of time. Our goal is simply not to meet the fate of Pheidippides.

The Pittsburgh Marathon Web site does a great job of explaining the physical conditioning involved. But it does little to explain the mental aspect. Most of this race is mental and everyone has his own motivation.

In my case, my ancestry can be traced to before the time of Pheidippides, to a time where a group of hunter-gatherers once roamed the Austrian Alps. We were chased by saber-tooth tigers as we competed for woolly mammoths to feed our families. While the elite, well-conditioned and young perform their stretching behind the starting line listening to the soothing music of Yanni, I will be in a self-induced catatonic state, summoning the locked history trapped within my DNA. I run to escape the big cat. I run to slay the woolly mammoth. OK, maybe I run because I am off my rocker.

Anyhow, I'm pretty happy that I have myself up to six miles even though the weather has been unfor-giving. My biggest secret has been not to take a cell phone. That's so when I'm totally exhausted, I can't call my wife to come get me wherever I am. I have to run to get back home or else become a human Popsicle.

You might think that the hardest part of training is getting up early in the dark, facing the Alberta clippers that sandblast your face or greeting the occasional ferocious dog that comes out to defend his turf. But easily the hardest part for me is ignoring the 20 pounds of fat cells (that I'll be losing along the way) that are screaming out at me to feed them a double-cheese Whopper with fries and a Coke.

My greatest piece of advice to anyone in Jefferson Township who is contemplating training for this event is to wear hunter orange. My loping gait is usually a give-away that I am not a graceful deer but I do sometimes worry that I could be mistaken for something wounded.

Hopefully, as I train, I can avoid injury, which is my greatest concern. The exhilaration of accomplishing a very demanding personal goal (for most of us) and finishing is unparalleled. The people along the Pittsburgh Marathon course, cheering runners on and offering them every drink imaginable, are the absolute best. If you have ever run the Pittsburgh Marathon, you know how special it is. On May 3, the words of Pheidippides — "we are victorious" — applies to everyone involved with the Pittsburgh Marathon.

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