

## **Where Dreams Come True – Mostly** (by Dave Fritsch)

Like many who run marathons, I have a dream of running the Boston Marathon. And like those many others, that dream is driven largely by the mystique of having to “qualify” in order to enter. Like qualifying to be in the Olympics. Or the Indy 500. Boston is unique among major U.S. marathons in this regard. You just don’t sign up, you’ve got to prove you’re worthy of the space you’ll take up.

Walt Disney World bills itself as the place “Where dreams come true”. So when I decided it was time for another marathon, I looked to Disney. My wife and I had spent our honeymoon there, we returned on our tenth anniversary with our children, and we brought our son there as a surprise for his sixth birthday. Disney felt familiar, and after running marathons in the two cities I’ve called home, I knew the comfort that comes with familiarity. My last marathon was a disappointing experience marred by the inefficiencies of an inexperienced inaugural race. I was also looking for the antithesis of that experience. The Disney Marathon drew me in based on those previous Disney experiences and the promises it offered. Surely Disney would be up to the task - no organization is better at moving people, and taking the family to the parks after the race would provide a way to thank them for their patience after all the time spent training. The Disney Marathon would be my next marathon.

Now at this point, the dream of qualifying for Boston seemed nearly impossible. It would require a new PR of nearly fifteen minutes. Certainly, the qualifier would be a stretch goal to say the least and as such, I needed some fall back goals. It’s good to go into a race with three goals – one that is reasonably achievable, one that is a fall back for when conditions are against you, and one that is a stretch – just at the edge of your reach if everything goes your way. So with the stretch goals set, I laid down my other goals. Feeling that my PR (3:35) was pretty soft, the fall back goal would be sub-3:30. The target goal would be something kind of nebulous – a time that was clearly sub-3:30, something like a 3:25. Then there was the 3:20:59 – what it would take to get my 42-year-old self to Boston.

So I’ve got the race, and I’ve got the goals. Now I needed a plan. My past marathons were self-coached using very basic training plans from the NYC Marathon website. After my first marathon, I added speed workout with good results. It was this path that I started down, but in the back of my head, I really felt I needed something more. *I’d thought about using a coach for my next marathon in the post race scrutiny of my last marathon, and even discussed it with my wife. Reaching out to others is not quite my forte though, so I drove on solo with a plan similar to what I’d done in the past.*

*The coach thing remained in the background only coming up occasionally in conversation. Until our anniversary that is, when my wife presented me with a certificate for a coaching consultation and a complete coached plan if I wanted. Upon hearing about this, a colleague suggested I check to see if she’d taken out an extra life insurance policy on me. I got a good laugh out of that one. Anyway, the consultation went well, and now I had a coach and a completely new training plan based on heart rates and training zones.*

*I’d laid some good base work on my own, so we were able to jump right into a reasonably aggressive plan built around a core of quality miles with targeted goals for each workout, which would get me under 3:30. This had a certain appeal to me, as all that was required of me was to simply “show up” – I did not have to do all the thinking to decide distances, paces, efforts, coach did that – I just went out and ran the plan. After a few weeks of exceeding the training goals, and getting comfortable with our relationship, we ratcheted up the training. Now Boston wasn’t looking quite as far-fetched and sub-3:30 became almost a given. The training became routine – speedwork Tuesday, mid-long run Wednesday, tempo run Thursday, strength Friday, long run Saturday, and recovery run Sunday. Week after week it would continue, and week after week I would continue to beat those training goal plans and yet manage to avoid overtraining and the ill effects that come with it. The coach thing was working real well, and those early goals firmed up – 3:30 / 3:22-3:24 / 3:20 or better.*

Thus it is how I got to standing in the A corral of the Blue start in the predawn hours of a January Sunday in Florida with a 3:25 pace band on one wrist and a 3:20 on the other. I’d survived the training, the paranoia of the final weeks of training praying that some little thing doesn’t ruin the training investment

and the nervous energy eating up my patience those last few days before the race. After big screen videos, speeches, words of encouragement (including some from Delta Duster's favorite former Olympian Jeff Galloway – who as coincidence would have it was on my flight to MCO) we were sent on our way by Mickey, Minnie, Donald and Goofy in a blast of fireworks and flames.

Now people who run marathons will tell you the race begins at twenty miles, the location of the proverbial "wall". Up to twenty miles, the race felt like a fast training run. I had meandered into the 3:20 pace group by the first mile and just joined the crowd. I was feeling comfortable and relaxed and decided to give my best go for that Boston qualifier brass ring. The early miles are mostly quiet solitude through the pines between the parks, punctuated by large crowds at the resort properties and the Ticketing and Transportation area outside the Magic Kingdom. In the gathering light, the backstage areas of Epcot and the Magic Kingdom are not unlike the back of the neighborhood strip mall. The front side is all Disney magic – from the lights around the World Showcase Lagoon at Epcot, to the Mayor of Main St. USA welcoming you to the Magic Kingdom, to the buglers trumpeting your arrival from the parapets of Cinderella's Castle and Rafiki welcoming you to Animal Kingdom. Characters dot the course through each of the parks. I ran with this 3:20 pace group, sometimes a step or two ahead, sometimes a step or two behind. At time were the course was one traffic lane wide we'd become a tight cluster, occasionally bumping. Where the course was wider we'd spread out. Mile after mile, we kept plugging away and as the miles accumulated the banter, prevalent earlier on, slowly dropped off.

Mile 20 comes after exiting Animal Kingdom on the road to an out and back segment near the Disney Wide World of Sports Complex. By now, the Florida sun had cleared the trees, the start temp of 55 degrees was history and we were on our way to a high near 80. On this stretch of road, there was no place to hide from the sun. I hated the Freedom Parkway out and back at the ING Georgia Marathon and I wasn't liking this one either – for the same reason. Still I felt good and was easily keeping pace with the group as we made our way to the turn around point. Heading back in though, suddenly I was dropping off the back of the pack. Not good, since I was figuring I'd hang with them to Hollywood Studios and then see about making a break for a sub 3:20 on my own. A few quick steps and I was firmly back in the middle of the pace group and on my way through mile 21 and into 22.

I was still with the 3:20 pace group as we turned to enter Hollywood Studios, the last park before the Epcot finish. Somewhere between the Backlot Tour and the New York City street though I must have passed Pooh Bear. I didn't see him, but I sure felt him on my back as the 3:20 pace group moved away as we passed into mile 23 into 24. With the tight turns, narrow paths, and limited sight lines in the park, the pace group had vanished. By the time I made it out of the park and onto the pathway leading to the Epcot resorts, the pace group had put a good hundred yards on me. Even the guy dressed as Minnie Mouse was running away from me. I tried to at least maintain the gap on the pace group, but it was beginning to feel like Pooh had invited Brer Bear, Baloo and every other Disney bear character to hop on and enjoy the ride.

I needed to do something, I was still on pace to get the Boston qualifier, but my cushion had eroded fast and I went thru the mile 24 clock right about 3:20 pace – I still had the fifty-nine second grace though (3:20:59 would qualify me). A little more than two miles at about 8:05 pace and I was golden. I tried the mantra trick repeating to myself "going to Boston, going to Boston" and managed my way past the BoardWalk Inn, and the Yacht and Beach Club. It was now less than two miles to go and we were heading back into Epcot where mile 25 would be a thing of the past. Going through the mile 25 clock there was still hope, I was still ahead of 3:20:59 pace, and I dug deep to nail the last mile determined to not let the qualifier slip away.

The marathon magazine includes the marathon's slogan prominently placed on the cover. The slogan – "Endless Miles. Endless Smiles." Mile 26 was one of those endless miles. I knew mile 26 ended in the shadow of Spaceship Earth (Epcot's big golf ball looking structure), but the sightlines from the course made it difficult to measure any progress in getting there. By now my feet were feeling like they were on fire and things were no longer going as I'd hoped. Finally turning to the plaza around Spaceship Earth, I expected to see the mile marker and just how much of my remaining cushion was gone. I began to think about not getting the qualifier. But there was no mile marker. By now I'd started getting a little tunnel

vision, but heck I could gut it out. I just needed that mile marker and I could do the last 0.2 on autopilot. After all my wife and kids should be in the finish area and I needed to look strong, this being my first marathon finish that they would see.

The mile 26 clock was in an auxiliary park entrance adjacent to the main entrance. Another area of limited sight lines and tight turns leading into the finish stretch in the parking lot where the pre-/post-race activities were staged. That mile 26 clock had bad news – I had less than a minute to cover the last two tenths of a mile for a qualifier. The qualifier dream wasn't going to happen today – it was just impossible at this point. But I still had other goals to beat and I put down everything I had left. I couldn't see the finish yet, but I could certainly try to beat that 3:25 goal by as big a margin as possible. Then the wheels came off. The tunnel vision was back and in an instant, I'd taken what seemed like three or four leaning strides. I pulled the plug and stopped – this wasn't right. But I took a breath and refused to let this race end this way. I walked what seemed a couple of strides, and started running again. There it was – the finish mats. That's about all I saw – the finish mats. Not the finish line characters, not the crowds, not the signs, just the mats. That's what I ran for – the finish mats.

I crossed the line and stopped my watch (yup – I ruined my finisher photo), stowed the memory. My watch said 3:23:19. That last two tenths was horrid. I made my way to the medals and chip return, kind of wobbly but heck I just hit a twelve-minute PR. I was greeted by a medical staffer who asked if I was ok and if I wanted to sit down. Figuring if she was asking, I must be doing worse than I felt, so I took her up on it and found myself being wheeled into the med area in a wheelchair and being given cups of water.

Once they parked me in the sun and left, the demons came to roost. I feel okay, but am I really? Yeah, I really am. Would I know if I wasn't? I don't make it a habit of going to the med area in a wheelchair. This was virgin territory. Yeah, I really am okay but what if I've wasted myself so bad that wouldn't be able to enjoy the parks with the family. Did I just blew the remainder of the vacation and the two days of park tickets? The family – did they see that stagger? They're probably getting concerned – wondering where I am. I want to tell them I'm alright, just chilling out, but don't have my phone with me.

I looked at the big Mickey head finisher's medal around my neck and realized I hadn't turned in my chip. I looked to my shoe and it wasn't there. Hmm, guess I wasn't quite as together as I thought. But why? I looked back through my watch splits, which though inaccurate (the GPS gods disagreed with the course certification gods), told the story. I red lined big time - each of the last 3 splits included a max heart at or within a heart beat of my estimated max heart rate (I'd later figure out I'd done that for about ten minutes right up to the stagger just past mile 26). That would explain a lot.

In the end, I made my way out from the med area, reclaimed my bag, and was getting ready to call and let the family know I was ok, but there they were at the bag claim tent exit, tears in their eyes and a look like I'd survived the worst accident imaginable. This was not the triumphant reunion I'd planned. They'd witnessed the entire stagger episode (which I was told was a lot longer and uglier than it was from my point of view). And while I was sitting in the med area, they were thinking the worst, only because they didn't know. After profuse apologies for scaring them so by stubbornly chasing the qualifier in such a manner, I got them assured that I was okay and everything was fine. It was back to the hotel for a shower and two days in the parks. And the best part of any marathon – the words of strangers congratulating you for the feat you've just accomplished.

In my mind though, the lingering thought was that it is not often that I've laid it all on the line like that in pursuit of a goal. On this day I had given it everything – everything – I had. I'd come up short, but I came up short because of me and this was a good thing. My limits were my own and weren't compromised by the failings of others. With a smashing PR, my dreams did come true at the Disney Marathon – mostly. The Boston qualifier is still out there, but then it's good to have a dream to chase.