

Marathon #21
I RAN Marathon-San Antonio
March 31, 2012- David Jones



I never step on a scale. Even when it's physician mandated, I look away and say, "Don't tell me." It's not like I have arithmophobia—hell, I'm a CPA. I just believe the number is meaningless. The conventional wisdom is that weight is the best general indicator of physical condition; that's a bunch of crap.

You'll often see runners at the front of the chute who look like they'll be lucky to survive past mile one. For many, your fat-cist prejudice is confirmed, and as you pass by, you snarl in disdain because you were boxed in as they waddled in front. However, there's always a couple of runners who break the "husky" stereotype and finish respectably high in the pack. I saw an extreme example at the San Antonio Marathon in November.

Standing next to me in the first corral was a little roly-poly dressed in all black. However, what really caught my attention were his bare feet—no shoes, no socks, no tape, not even a Band-Aid. I stared at him superciliously for a few seconds, then rolled my eyes as if to say, "You, sir, are no Abebe Bikila." However, at mile eight, I looked to my right and that little jelly bean was holding strong. I decided that next time I would be more open-minded and STHUAJR.

The real reason I don't step on a scale is because it's a no win. Never in recorded history has anyone ever stepped on a scale, read the number, and thought, *That's perfect! That's the exact number I want, not a pound more or less.* Oh, no—at best it's almost perfect, just a little off optimal. At worst, it's just damn depressing. Accordingly, I haven't weighed myself once in six years.

However, I do employ a general flab-o-meter: the notches on my belt. Starting with the innermost notch, I've developed this stratified scale:

Notch #1: You're in top form! With a little good weather, you'll PR for sure.

Notch #2: You're in decent shape. With excellent weather, good pacing, and a flat course, you might PR.

Notch #3: Looks like someone has been enjoying himself? Well, run your best and try not to hurt yourself.

Notch #4: Congratulations—you're a total lard ass! I hope you're happy with yourself.

Notch #5: Oh my God, NO!—I'm going to have to quit running, buy some metrosexual gaudy spandex shorts, and become a cyclist. Please, God, kill me now.

I temporarily made it to Notch #1 for two weeks in the fall. Though running great, I looked like a discarded pin-up Halloween skeleton. In fact, when I made an office visit for a cough, my doctor took one look and handed me a prescription. I thought it was for antibiotics—nope—a full-body MRI.

Notch #2 is my general running weight, and I struggle to maintain it. After daily doubles of Christmas cookies, I was sucking it in to hit Notch #2 when I ran the Kingwood Marathon. A month later, I was a solid Notch #3 for Galveston. Two weeks more and a few bottles of wine,

combined with the occasional Dairy Queen pit stop, I was officially at Notch #4. I knew only the fear of lugging around an extra ten flabby pounds for a full marathon could save me.

I hastily searched the Web for a race. I found a local one scheduled just a month away—The I R A N Marathon in San Antonio. The event is very small, with only about 120 runners—no big corporate sponsors, no designated pacers, not even age division awards. The course itself is no frills as it's run at Schnabel Park.

I ran the park last year for a local 20-miler. It is located five minutes north of Loop 410 and surprisingly scenic given it's surrounded by urban sprawl. The park is thickly wooded, and the trail winds up and down rolling hills. The best course feature is its unblemished and beautifully paved, solid concrete path. Normally for a park run, you'd expect a lopsided, cracked, and potholed trail. The worst course feature is its unblemished and beautifully paved, solid concrete path. The concrete is great for a 10k or halfer, but over 26 miles, its hard surface just beats the hell out of you. This would be especially true given the extra flab I was carrying.

Oh, I had made some progress since I committed to the race, if you define progress as not getting any fatter. But I hadn't really lost much weight, though with a little mechanical leverage, I was able to squeeze into Notch #2. However, weight wasn't my only problem. I hadn't really trained to run a full marathon. Over the past two months, the longest run I had done was a single 18-miler. Lastly was the terrible weather. At gun it was already 68 degrees with 98 percent humidity; the forecast high was for 91 degrees—that's 91!

As I apprehensively made my way into the chute, I was glad to see a friendly face, Ultra Don. We exchanged greetings, and then Don lamented, "I haven't run a marathon since Houston, two months ago." A two-month marathon race gap for Ultra Don is equivalent to the average runner taking off eight years. We mutually stated our plans to just cruise it with no particular goal and made our way into the chute.

As I stood behind the start line, I thought, *What the hell am I doing here! I'm fat, out-of-shape, and the weather is crap.* The gun fired and we were off!

Two runners shot out of the chute, leaving the pack behind. I went out with an easy and relaxed stride. I had no planned pace or even time. However, about a half mile in, I found myself sharing third place with a younger runner. We began to chit-chat and he asked, "The half or the full?" I replied the full, and he said the half. It would have been nice to keep the moderate pace and friendly conversation longer, but at mile three we had to get serious as the hill work began.

The course itself was four out-and-back laps along a stretch with a few rolling hills. However, the race director added a strenuous climb, not on the loop itself, but as a perpendicular tributary. The hill climbed about thirty-five feet over a quarter mile. Up once or twice would have been enough. Unfortunately, we had to turn left and run up when heading outbound and then turn right and hump it up on the way back, for a total of eight climbs.

After the first time up and down, the half-marathoner pulled away and I was alone. I strode out to the turnaround and then pushed up the hill again on the way inbound. I still felt rhythmic after completing the first loop. Though covered in sweat from the warm and humid weather, surprisingly, I held a steady breathing pattern. Outbound again, I made my way up the hill climb for a third time. Fifteen minutes later, I made the U-turn at path's end and began the inbound stretch. I caught the halfer at mile 10 and moved into third among all runners.

Coming through the checkpoint at the end of the second lap, I saw the two lead runners seated on one of the pavilion's picnic tables. That meant they were halfers, which meant I was the marathon leader. *Leader?! Oh, that's just wrong! It would be a crime for a fat and out-of-shape accountant to win this.* Well, it was still early, and I had confidence that a good runner would catch me.

I started outbound for the third lap and again up the hill for the fifth time, which had somehow grown higher. The sun was now above the tree-line and beating down; the hills were also wearing on me. I made the third-lap turnaround at mile 15 and was hurting. Fortunately, some other runners noted my lead and offered encouragement, "Nobody is near you; you can cruise it," "Bell lap is coming up; it's yours," and "You're looking good—well, for a fat and out-of-shape accountant." Okay, that last one was actually me thinking out loud.

Completing the third lap, I would have been toast, but was ironically saved by the course design. Oh, the course itself was a bear, but it was looped. Instead of thinking, *Seven more miles to go*, I said to myself, *Just ONE MORE LAP!* I went through the checkpoint and outbound for the final lap. *Don't walk, don't walk! You've made it up six times already*, I repeated while struggling up the hill for the seventh climb.

Almost at the U-turn for a final time, I saw Ultra Don. He was completing his third lap and chatting with another runner as they walked up an incline. When a world-class ultrarunner like Don has decided it's just too hot to race uphill, you know you're in the danger zone.

I made the turn, now at mile 23, and was a bit concerned. I was completely dehydrated and believed heat stroke was a real possibility. But all I needed was to make it up the hill for the final eighth time. Reaching the base, I was determined not to stop and walk. That determination lasted 30 seconds—too much, and I couldn't breathe. I alternated walking and jogging every half minute to reach the top.

With just two miles remaining, I accepted that I had nothing left. Then just behind me, I heard, "Dude!" Two young men on mountain bikes pulled alongside. "Dude—we, like, saw you running on the other side of the park—like, three hours ago! I wish I had your stamina." It was enough. I gutted it up the final mile.

I crossed in 3:41:01, winning—First out of about 25 full-marathon starters, though only 18 finished the race.

I think that may be a world record. Yes, I'm quite sure that many many years from now, someone will come across an old dusty box in the back room of a used bookstore. Inside they'll find a partially torn and faded copy of the *2012 Guinness Book of World Records*. Thumbing through the back pages, browsing the "Miscellaneous" final chapter, they'll see my name listed: "David G. Jones, winner of the world's smallest, most obscure, and inconsequential marathon."

Well, perhaps I'm being too negative. I guess placing first in the world's smallest, most obscure, and inconsequential marathon is still preferable to placing second in the world's smallest, most obscure, and inconsequential marathon.

I'll take it!

