

## RUNNING AROUND PARIS

It was a dark and stormy winter. It was no fun to try to train for a marathon during rain, wind, sometimes snow, often ice, and lots of cold. There was a 3 ½ year lapse since my last marathon and 2 ½ years ago I had some surgery with major consequences. In spite of that, I ran 515 miles from December through April to get ready for the 2010 Paris Marathon.

The thought was in the back of my brain for many years. Over those years, I have done New York, Boston and Cape Cod. I had always thought that Paris or Dublin would be fun and very meaningful. The thought began to jell into a plan when, one night in the Quarter Deck, when, Bob said “Let’s go to Paris and you can run the marathon”. The plan became a project when I found out that my other idea, to get a waiver for Boston, would cost \$250. Paris was 90 Euros. Yes, there would also be transportation, lodging, food etc. to drive up that cost, but then there would also be croissants, real French bread, Notre Dame, Musee D’Orsay, and walking around Paris. It became a no brainer and I registered.

On April 11, I stood poised with 40,000 Frenchmen and other runners from all over the world at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe staring down the Champs-Elysees.



The morning was sunny, breezy and rather cool...a good day for running.

A friend, John, who had done Paris before, had told me when I asked him for his best advice, “Be forgiving.” As the crowd grew at the start, several cars driven by very stubborn and very patient Parisians, inched their way through the runners. An example of knowing what John meant. The runners were dressed for warmth in plastic bags with red letters saying Marathon de Paris, GDF Suez (their main sponsor). Suddenly we were moving and the bags were taken off and, not launched to the side as in Cape Cod, Boston or NY, but dropped right at one’s feet. Those of us in the back got a little extra knee warmup exercise as we climbed over the bags and shook them from our sneakers. Be forgiving, example #2.

Down the Champs Elysees we went, crowds yelling, bands playing. The rain, the snow, the ice, the wind were all in the past. I just had to get to the ligne d’arrivee.

Within two miles, we came to the Place de la Concorde.



In the middle there is a column and fountains which mark the site of the guillotine, where scores of French people lost their heads during the Reign of Terror. I thought of Marie Antoinette who lost her royal head here and an ancestor of Russ Pelletier who was the first person to meet his end in that fashion. I truly thought of how 320 years later can bring crowds for another reason but still with terrors of their own.

Veering left at the fountain, we ran down the Rue de Rivoli,



past the Louvre,



and past the Hotel de Ville (City Hall).



Only one day before, I was surprised and pleased to learn that my son, Bill had decided to come to Paris to watch me run. He had found a hotel on the Rue de Rivoli, just past the Hotel de Ville just before Mile 3. The race would run outside his door. As I approached him and his Dad standing on the sidewalk, I started to laugh. Seinfeld fans will remember the episode where JeanPaul JeanPaul is running the New York Marathon and Kramer is holding out a cup. Only as he gulps it does JPJP realize that it is filled with hot tea. Bill and Bob were holding out cups full of caf . Only in Paris they don't have a lot of Styrofoam "go" cups, so Bill had convinced a waiter to let him take out two china cups and saucers. What a sight and a joy they were.

Onward. At this point the crowd is thinning out. I am getting tired as I have not slept well the last few nights and I am getting a little discouraged that it seems to be taking so long. A short distance later, I see the first water stop. It was being taken apart. Be

Forgiving # 3. (I will no more note the number of Be Forgiving instances. The main reason is more and more things began to make me smile to the point that what was a little annoying shrunk by comparison)

I was urged to go just a little further to the Revitailment (Refreshment) stop at Mile 3. There, they were offering bananas from Guadeloupe, raisins, oranges and small bottles of water. What a spread. Now, imagine all the banana peels, orange rinds and puddles for the next several feet of the course. However, the bottles of water were great because I did not know if my pace would allow me to get to the next water stop in time and I could carry the small bottle easily along with me.

The street names changed as we headed east along the right bank. A jag down the Rue Reuilly led to the Place de la Bastille and the new opera house.



Here stood the prison that was stormed in the first uprising of the French Revolution.

Once again, going right of the column, we wound our way to the Bois de Vincennes. This is a large park where people go to stroll, bike, roller blade and on this particular Sunday, 40,000 runners charge through its tree lined avenues.

At this point, Miles 7 and 8, the crowd had really thinned. I tell people I have two speeds, “on” and “off”. My “on” seemed to be going very slowly and those with real speeds had flown by. The tired runner van had already offered me a ride. Was I insulted. Then I noticed more and more folks around me were walking. Even when the walker is a power walker, it is humbling to know you are running only as fast as others are walking.

At this point, a volunteer on a bike came along and said : “Ca va?”. I assured him yes things were fine. That began the start of one of the nicest parts of the run. When you do runs like marathons, you meet people and you share moments, minutes and perhaps hours. Probably you won’t meet again, but you are glad to be in their company.

I had chatted with Canadians, Alaskans, Australians along the way and later on Thai and Pakistani. However, I was kind of sorry I was not using my French. Well the Man on the Bicycle took care of that. For the next 12 miles, he and I chatted back and forth. We talked about Paris. I told him what was similar to New York and what was different. We even talked about retirement.

I began to realize that this man was like a Mother Hen. In addition to accompanying me, he was checking in on the five or six other folks nearby. I thought it not wise to call him that name, so I switched to thinking of him as an Ange Gardien, a guardian angel.

He helped us maneuver the roads in the park, he told the bands to play it again for us, the slower folk and more, and as more of the water stops were being closed down, he helped us get water and weave our way through.

Finally out of the Bois de Vincennes and heading back to the Place do la Bastille. I knew Bob would be waiting for me at Mile 13. I thought if I could get there, I could muster enough enthusiasm and motivation to convince myself that I was past the middle and on my way home. As we approached, our little gaggle was ushered onto the sidewalks as the streets of this very busy Paris neighborhood were now open to traffic. As we ran/walked, we would stop at the curb and wait for our Ange to direct us. The commands would come: "Tout droit!" "A gauche!" "A droit". I understood! But then I had a real Duh!!! Moment. Almost halfway through, I realized that there was a blue line painted in the street, like the FreedomTrail, directing us along the course.

On this stretch of this road and frequently during the rest of the race, several women of my age bracket, who were not watching the race but just walking down the street, saw me, stopped and began to yell: "Bravo, Madame! Allez! Allez!" If you can't run at the beginning, receiving saluts like that make doing what you can feel just fine!

Following the ligne bleue, I began to get ahead of my fellow chicks and then sure enough, there was my Bob at Mile 13. I was so happy, I began jumping up and down. Then the AG came along and said: "Ce n'est pas fini!" It is not finished. I told him I knew but took a moment more to introduce him to Bob. After hand shaking all around, I was off on the last half.

Now came the best part. Down the Quai Henri IV, on to the banks of the Seine. Probably any picture you have seen of Paris was of something on this Quai or shot from it. It became a riverside roadway that was again, filled with the Sunday stroller, bladers, stroller pushers and runners. Across the water, the following could be seen.



Ile St. Louis



Notre Dame



Institut de France (Center of French Culture)



Musee d'Orsay (Impressionist Museum)



Les Invalides (Napolean's Tomb)

Along here, there was another welcome Refreshment table. At each one, I had traded in my bottle of water for a fresh one and then trudged on. From this point on, each of the Refreshment tables were almost completely closed and the big Zamboni sized street cleaners from the City of Paris DPW were scooping up the orange and banana peels. They were doing such a thorough job, they were erasing the Ligne Bleue! Mon Dieu!

Now came a marathon first for me. Into a tunnel that was closed to traffic, but quite dark and dusty. Just as I was wondering where was the tunnel where Princess Di was killed, along came one of the street cleaners causing our little group to really crowd a droit.

Coming out, I saw what I recognized as the Place de Chaillot



Looking across the river from there was something we have long associated with Paris.



not quite this close, but anyone would be sure of what it is.

I have to say that for me, this part of the race was the absolute best. It was like a movie and then I realized I was at mile 20 and had not experienced my normal marathon brain dead feeling. It had to be the sites. I also must admit it was probably due to what I was chewing on and give a product endorsement to Cliff Bar Shot Blocks.



Strawberry flavored, gummy bear consistency chewables, they really helped keep me on task. No, I am not getting a fee.

So now, my friends and I were getting closer as we ran through one of the nicest neighborhoods in Paris. Finally we approached the Bois de Boulogne. But before you could go in, you had to run down one street on the outside of this park, turn around and come back again on another street and then you get to go in!



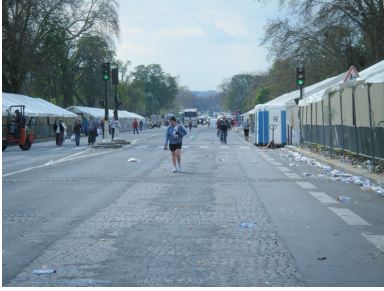
Most of my family and Falmouth friends had heard me worrying about this last 4 miles. The reason was, I was able to find some, but not all of the park's streets that were on the marathon course on Google Maps. The above photo is like those marked roads. But then once again, thanks to the Ligne Bleue, I realized the other "streets" were actually unpaved paths, the names of which did not show up on Google. They were similar to the one below, but more narrow



At 40 km about Mile 24, I had promised myself I could call Bob who was waiting at the finish line. I have never carried a cell phone in a marathon before, but I had the Bois de Boulogne jitters and, if the Ange Gardien had not been there, I might have needed it. As I took out the phone to call Bob it said "1 message received". When I opened it, I was so touched to see it was from my brother who is not feeling well. His advice was good luck, god speed and go have a Kronenbourg. I kept running, but managed to text him back. Oh, the talent I possess. Then the call to Bob; he was there and waiting with Bill.

I came alongside a woman who was on a charity team. One of her coaches told her how to exit the park and approach the finish line. I asked him to repeat it. He told me just follow her. I did. We overshot the finish. When we finally got back to it, it was too late. I knew I was running slow and I expected to miss the finish. However, I got there just in time to see the actual "Arrivee" sign about to be loaded into a truck.

A volunteer clipped my chip and I began the long walk to “M” to meet my family. I am not sure why, but they organize a lot of the race by first names.



But, I had finished. 3 ½ years after the last marathon, I turned my switch to “on” and did a 26.2 mile, 42.195km run through the streets of one of my favorite cities in the world. And then there they were, Bob and Bill, with hugs and congrats and big, big smiles. It felt good.



Life is good!

## Epilogue

Bob and I are Music Directors for the Cape Cod Marathon. Over the years, because I run so slowly, and know what it is like to be out there when the whole world has finished, I bug the Race Directors to let me wait at the finish line for the stragglers to give them their medal. I have been christened the After Hours Director. Recently another member of the club, Kris , has joined me and now there are two AHD's.

On April 11<sup>th</sup>, when I met up with Bob and Bill, I was ok with missing the finish and not having a recorded official time. I realized though I was sad about something. I turned and saw people coming in with medals and began asking where they got them. They told me there was a woman where the finish line had been, giving them out. At Bob and Bill's urging, in spite of how tired I was, I turned and walked/ran and got back to her. I was so worried I would not find her, but then, there she was in her red coat. I ran up to her, told her my story and while I can't remember her face, I remember how good I felt when she gave me my medal. The Paris Marathon version of La Directrice des Apres Heures. I was overjoyed. But then she did something that was very French and very Carolyn Bird, if you know her. No, she did not give me a kiss on each cheek. Rather she leaned forward and gave me a hug that I will remember for a long time. La vie est bonne!

Maggi Yates  
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