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Running with Kathrine: What Goes Around Comes Around

Gilligan's Travels

by Thom Gilligan

The old saying "what goes around comes around" can sneak up on you at any moment. In 2007, I had convinced the Bermuda Track & Field Association to create the Bermuda Triangle Challenge (BTC) by allowing runners to compete in Friday's Front Street Mile, Saturday's 10K and either the marathon or half-marathon on Sunday.

The Fairmont Hamilton was the race headquarters hotel, conveniently located on Front Street near the start. Kathrine Switzer had been hired as a consultant by Fairmont Hotels to organize some fitness programs for them. I had first met Kathrine in Bermuda for Bermuda Race Weekend in 1979. I contacted her to suggest that she compete in the inaugural BTC, including the half-marathon. I knew that she had retired from running races to concentrate on writing, TV commentating and promoting the sport. After some moaning and groaning about having to get back into half-marathon shape, she reluctantly agreed to race. As expected, she ran well, received four medals and it lit some competitive fire in her belly.

She then set a goal of running the 2010 Athens Marathon that commemorated Pheidippides historic run from Marathon to Athens in 490 B.C. Kathrine was booked to travel with us as a celebrity host and keynote speaker to the Marathon Tours & Travel group of 900 runners and family members. This would be her first marathon in over 40 years. She struggled over the notorious Athenian hills while questioning the reasoning behind her return to marathoning. Thankfully, her husband Roger followed her along the route to provide loving inspiration, not to mention a salve to her suffering and to keep the goal (finishing) intact.

And why am I mentioning this? Well, I received an email from Kathrine on November 26 "offering" me the opportunity to garner a Boston bib in exchange for running Boston, all in an effort to raise funds for the 261 Foundation, Kathrine's non-profit organization that provides running opportunities for women. April's event will commemorate the 50th anniversary of Kathrine's historic 1967 run when she became the first women to officially finish the Boston Marathon. All Boston cognoscenti know the story well, envisioning the famous photograph of Co-Race Director Jock Simple trying to yank her off the course at about the two mile mark after discovering that a women had the audacity to enter his race. (Kathrine was wearing bib no. 261.)

Kathrine knew that I had retired from running marathons after the 2000 Boston, which was my 22nd Boston and 62nd marathon overall (including one ultra). In that Boston I felt bone-on-bone in my hip joints while staggering down Boylston Street toward the finish. The clock was in the 3:50s and I had promised myself that I should stop running marathons once I couldn't break 4-hours. Admittedly, a lack of winter training was my enemy, but I could not deny that my hips were trying to tell me something after many years of hard training. Besides, the half-marathon distance or less could still provide goals to keep the competitive juices flowing.

Kathrine and I have been close friends for almost 40 years. She knew that I would perceive her "offer" as a challenge. I re-read the email with a smirk, knowing that she was turning the tables on me as I did with her back in 2007. The B.A.A. has offered the 261 Fearless Foundation some entries so Kathrine can solicit women to run with her this spring. I had jokingly mentioned that I would run with her if she decided to run Boston again. Well, she has now decided to invite two men to run with her. How could I say no to such a distinguished offer? After some moaning and groaning about having to spend another winter in New England training for Boston, I am all in.

I have always run for the love of the sport and the competition. And the sport has given me a career opportunity to have a wonderful lifestyle, traveling around the world leading groups of runners to exotic locations on all seven continents. This would be one way to give something back to the sport that I love. I remember the days when women only comprised about 10% of race fields. Raising funds for women's running is certainly a worthwhile cause.

I am sure that there are many old friends who would love to see me in pain (once again) while suffering my way down Boylston Street, and who would contribute on my behalf for the sheer entertainment (and for the cause!). I could also eradicate all the guilt that I've felt each and every year that I've stood in the finish line bleachers cheering on everyone else. I am so excited just thinking about being in Hopkinton once more to be a part of running's most historic marathon!

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