

The First Sunday in November

By Dorg

It looked like we were going directly to jail without passing go. As the New York City Policeman reached for his handcuffs I realized that not only were we going to miss running the marathon but we were also about to be arrested.

The New York City Marathon is always the first Sunday in November and I had run it three times. The 1990 Marathon was my fourth and this time my good pal Hugh Ruthven was joining me from Vancouver. Six long hard months of arduous training led us to the Big Apple. We had endured 18 mile training runs out to the airport and back in the rain and the discipline of putting in 40 to 50 miles a week despite our busy schedules as junior advertising agency executives. Not only did poor Hugh have to put up with the training, but he had the added drudgery of listening to me boast of how great it was going to be. "Yep Hubey, it will be the experience of a lifetime, just you wait and see".

I had been through the intimidating entrance procedure, the lengthy registration line-ups, the crowded chartered buses to Staten Island and the entire premarathon experience three times. Hugh had no reason to question his running mentor when I told him that if we left the Hyatt Grand Central Hotel by cab at 8 a.m. race day we would have plenty of time to make it to the start on Staten Island. The marathon began at 10:40. On a Sunday morning the drive from Manhattan to the other side of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge where the New York City Marathon began would take about half an hour. I knew that because I had done it before on board the marathon buses. Every year dozens of shuttle buses organized by the New York City Road Runner Club leave from the downtown Manhattan Library between 5:30 and 7:00am. That's awfully early in the morning. The ride is free and they drop you off at Fort Wadsworth, a military compound on Staten Island, which turns into a holding area for the 26,000 entrants. The buses drop you off between 6:00 and 7:30 a.m., which leaves three or four hours of waiting in a cold tent, sitting on a newspaper with nothing to do. When I suggested to Hugh that buses were for the birds and we should take a cab, he understood completely.

We had ordered an 8 a.m. cab through the hotel concierge the night before and split five ways, it wasn't going to be a big expense. Doug, his wife Mary, and Kevin were friends of mine from Vancouver staying at the Hyatt. We had been pasta loading at a swanky Manhattan restaurant the night before and agreed that a cab was a great idea. That way we could avoid the over crowded buses and sleep in an extra hour before the big race.

Sunday morning Hugh and I were psyched. Wearing sweat pants with our bib numbers pinned to our singlets, we stood on 42nd Ave. sipping coffee out of Styrofoam cups and stretching our leg muscles waiting for the cab to arrive. The five of us chatted nervously and at 8 a.m. sharp a sedan pulled up to the curb to take us to our appointment with destiny. Doug and Mary took the front seat while Kevin, Hugh and I slid into the back.

Now maybe it's just the strong Brooklyn accent but I think even the best mannered New York cab drivers sound rude giving instructions or explaining things. This cabby "instructed" us that no more than four passengers were allowed in the cavernous cab. We quickly decided that was no problem and we would let Doug, Mary and Kevin share the ride while Hugh and I would simply hail another cab. We shook hands, wished them the best of luck, and told them we would follow right behind.

After their cab left, Hugh and I discovered that neither one of us was carrying any money. We agreed I would dash to our room on the 34th floor to get carfare. For some reason the bank of elevators in the hotel moved painfully slowly that morning; either they were malfunctioning or every guest had decided to leave their room at the same time. Including time spent waiting for the elevator, riding the elevator, looking for my wallet, taking a quick nervous pee and running each way from the street to the hotel lobby, the ordeal took almost 20 minutes.

By now it was 8:25 a.m., two hours and 15 minutes to race time. Knowing it only takes 30 minutes by cab to the other side of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, I wasn't worried. I knew we would still be there before 9 a.m.

It could be that all those cab drivers with the thick accents were attending Sunday morning church services in Brooklyn. They certainly weren't in Manhattan or anywhere near the Grand Central Hyatt, and any cabs that did whiz by already had passengers; their drivers not even acknowledging our frantic arm waving.

Finally, at 8:40a.m. a cab picked us up. We were psyched; two hours till race time.

Downtown Manhattan takes on a funny feeling on Sunday morning. The hustle and bustle, the noise, traffic and all the people you expect in New York are conspicuous by their absence. Skyscrapers line the empty street. Racing down 42nd Street we made great time, the cab driver adjusting his cadence to hit the sequence of traffic lights turning green. It was sunny yet cool, just a perfect day for the marathon. I pointed out buildings and monuments to Hugh as we wound through Manhattan toward the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, which would take us under the Hudson River into Brooklyn and over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, onto Staten Island and the race starting line.

Approaching the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel, we noticed a number of flashing police cars blocking the entrance. Our Iranian cabby, with his limited command of the English language mumbled something that we couldn't understand but it sounded ominous. We came to a stop and realized that the tunnel was shut. Some motorists were waiting outside their cars, a number of cars were pulling U-turns and a few fellow marathoners were abandoning their cars and running up to the tunnel office. We told our cabby to wait for us and followed our running brethren. Inside the lobby of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel administrative office, were two of New York City's finest. Hugh anxiously asked, "What's happening with the tunnel?" It was 9 a.m.

The police officer, who didn't exactly overflow with compassion, replied brusquely, "MVA. At least an hour before it's cleared."

Hugh quickly explained that we had to make it to Staten Island for the beginning of the New York City Marathon and then asked for directions for an alternate route. The cop said, "So you guys are running in the big marathon", and looked at his watch. Then, in a thick Bronx accent, he looked Hugh in the eye and said with conviction, "Ya ain't gonna make it."

Finally, Hugh abandoned his history of our training and travel and said there had to be a way to get to Staten Island from here. At this, the cop launched into his explanation of an alternate route, through an elaborate number of thoroughfares, turnpikes and

expressways, which would take over two hours. He concluded his explanation of the complicated, lengthy route by repeating, "You're fucked, ya ain't gonna make it."

At this point, his partner jumped in with a helpful suggestion. "You've got one chance. I'm not sure what time it leaves but you could try the Staten Island Ferry." By the time he started giving directions to the ferry, we were already dashing back to our cab, figuring the driver should know how to get there. It was 9:10 a.m. and we were back in the cab, with Hugh barking to the driver, "Staten Island Ferry Terminal, on the double!" The only other time I had heard that expression was in a movie from the 1940's. As we drove on, I tried to reassure Hugh that we still had an hour and a half until race time. At 9:23 a.m., we pulled up to the ferry terminal and saw half a dozen people dressed like us, with numbers pinned to their chests, scurrying around. We paid the driver the \$27 cab fare and dashed into the terminal. At the top of the stairs leading to the entrance was a sign on a tripod that read: Next sailing at 9:30." Perfect! We ran to the man selling tickets.

I requested two tickets for the 9:30am sailing, to which he replied. "I'm sorry, the sailing has been cancelled. There's something wrong with the ship's engine." Hugh immediately launched into his passionate dissertation of how far we had come and how long we had trained. He even explained to the uninterested clerk that Vancouver was 3,000 miles from New York. I noticed that Hugh had picked up a bad habit from one of New York's finest, since the "F" word peppered his plea. Since explaining the distances we trained and traveled couldn't clear the accident in the tunnel, I was pretty sure yelling at this poor guy wouldn't fix the ferry engine. I spotted a police officer in the lobby and approached him, explaining our dilemma. Instead of giving him a geography lesson on the distance from Vancouver to New York, I tried a new angle; I told him we had left ourselves two hours and 40 minutes to get to the beginning of the marathon and how there was an accident in the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, otherwise we would have been there by now.

The cop looked at me incredulously and said, "You're kidding! The Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel is blocked and the Staten Island Ferry's not running? I don't think that's ever happened before!" By this time Hugh had joined me and he began telling the officer how far we had come and for how long we had been training. This guy seemed to care a bit more about us than his colleagues at the tunnel. He said it was going to be tight but there was a route that could probably get us there in less than an hour. By this time it was 9:30 a.m. and a couple of lost runners from Norway tried to join the conversation. The cop carefully explained the route we would have to take and even wished us luck. We thanked him and the four of us darted off to hail another cab.

The Norwegian couple didn't speak much English but seemed to be grateful to have hooked up with us. Apparently, they felt that Hugh and I knew what we were doing and, in broken English, asked us for reassurance that we would make it to the start in time. There were a number of cabs lined up in front of the ferry terminal and we ran up to one, explaining our circumstances to the driver and repeating the cop's directions. "Don't worry." He interrupted us. "I know how to get there. It shouldn't take more than 45 minutes – hop in."

Realizing that time was of the essence, the driver sped toward our destination. I should say our "mystery" destination, because we actually had no idea where we were or where we were headed. We had just over an hour to make it to the other side of the Verrazano

Narrows Bridge and onto Staten Island. But we didn't really know where the bridge was relative to our current position. New York is ten times as big as Vancouver and a hundred times more confusing. We were totally relying on cops and cabbies. And if you think that's bad, the Norwegian runners sitting in the front of the cab were relying on Hugh and me. They didn't even speak English. We cruised under overpasses, on and off the on- and off- ramps, and through a labyrinth of roads that supposedly wound toward Staten Island and the start of the New York City Marathon.

With 40 minutes to go before the start, we could finally see the twin suspension peaks of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, about seven miles in the distance. The starting line was on the far side of the bridge. I tapped the man from Norway on the shoulder and pointed out how close we were to our destination. There was a true sense of accomplishment in the cab and even the driver had caught the spirit; he was exceeding the speed limit by at least 20 miles an hour. The cop at the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel was wrong. We were going to make it.

The descending mileage numbers on the green highway signs marked the distance to the Staten Island turnoff: 2.5 miles; 1.5 miles; then "Next Exit follow HWY 195 to Verrazano Narrows Bridge, Staten Island". Our elation grew as we neared the exit. Then devastation hit as we once again saw police cars with their flashing lights blocking the exit. The cab pulled up beside a cop who was dropping bright orange safety cones 500 yards from the elusive freeway exit. By this time the cabby had become a soul mate. In the half hour it took to get from the Staten Island Ferry Terminal to this blocked freeway ramp, we had told him our story of the past two hours. He proved his loyalty as he rolled down his window to speak to the cop: "Look I got four people in the cab that have to be at the marathon start; could you let us through?" Hugh and I made sure the officer could see our bib numbers verifying that we were bona fide race contenders. The cop was not impressed. "The road is closed because the marathon is about to begin." The cab driver told him we would miss the race if he didn't let us through and the two New Yorkers bantered back and forth. I felt that because they spoke the same language we had a fair chance of getting through. I was hoping that Hugh wouldn't interrupt the conversation with his now-familiar testimonial. Just when I thought we were getting somewhere, the cop said, "Look buddy, I'm going to have to ask you to move your cab. I'm sorry". I swore. Hugh banged his hand on the back seat. The cabby cursed. But the Norwegian couple seemed oblivious to the gravity of this latest setback. The Norwegian man turned around from the front seat, smiled, and offered me a mint.

Meanwhile, more cars had pulled up to the blocked exit though none appeared to contain passengers wearing singlets with race registration numbers. However, one car was not immediately shuffled off. It bore a sign on the windshield which read "Press" in large letters, with a Sports Illustrated logo beneath. The driver flashed his credentials at the police. In a split second, we abandoned our faithful driver and two helpless foreigners as our survival instinct kicked in. If that car was getting through, we had to be in it. Considerations like paying the cab driver the \$45 we owed and the helpless Norwegians didn't cross our mind. We split. I like to look back on this as an intense focus on our goal rather than dishonesty and lack of consideration. Racing after the now-moving vehicle, we yelled, "Stop! Stop!" and when we reached striking distance I banged on the car to get the driver's attention. I gasped for breath begging for a ride. These were professionals, who understood the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. How could they turn us down? They reluctantly agreed and we jumped in.

The driver told us that they were only going to the Brooklyn side of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge since their assignment was to shoot the front-runners at the two-mile mark. Although a little out of their way, they volunteered to drop us off near a bridge on-ramp. We had 35 minutes to race time and by now crowds of marathon spectators were starting to line the course route. A quick mental calculation told me we would be at the base of the wrong side of the bridge in about 10 minutes, leaving 25 minutes to actually cross. The bridge is 1.5 miles long, and Hugh and I run eight-minute miles. We were going to make it! A relief until I remembered that this added 1.5 miles to the 26.2 mile marathon. Interesting race strategy.

The crowd of spectators was rapidly thickening. The driver let us off about two blocks from an on-ramp and we ran toward the bridge to shouts of "You'd better hurry" or "Hey, you're going the wrong way!"

We rounded a final corner and there it stood: the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, its 69-storey suspension towers looking down like welcoming beacons. But in the middle of the on-ramp stood another obstacle: two law enforcement officers. With 23 minutes left, they weren't going to stop us now. By this time we had plenty of experience with the New York City Police, so we knew they were not about to say "Fellows, where have you been? We didn't want to start the race without you. Hop into our squad car and we'll arrange for a police escort to the start line. We realize you've both come a long way and that you've trained for months." No. They were going to detain, divert or delay us. What they didn't know was that by now we were unstoppable.

Hugh was ahead of me and jogged up to the officer in charge, a big ugly man with a huge head and a craggy face. I prepared myself for the final confrontation but upon my approach did not like what I was hearing. The cop was threatening to arrest Hugh if he passed any further. Hugh went ballistic and began his newly perfected use of the "F" word. I could see we were not going to win. Though Hugh's argument was compelling, the cop was not going to back down. He angrily and emphatically repeated that the bridge was closed, and his superior had ordered him not to let any foot traffic onto the bridge until after the runners had passed. The cop's partner suggested perhaps we could just wait here and join the other runners as they came by. Perhaps he wasn't a runner.

By this time a crowd of spectators, clearly on our side, were yelling support. "Come on, let 'em through!" Unfortunately this grassroots support was not helping, and their numbers meant that if the cop were to capitulate there was an even larger audience in front of whom he could lose face. One voice in the crowd yelled "Buddy, just ignore him. They're not real police, they're the Triborough Bridge police. They can't do anything!" Well, this cop had handcuffs, a gun, mace and a walkie-talkie and looked like a real cop to me. Against him, Hugh was armed with new Nike Air running shoes and a race number. And the cop was backed up by another manned vehicle parked on the center span of the bridge. The hostility escalated. By now, crowd support was rising with dozens of onlookers calling ugly names at the cop. His partner radioed for backup.

As sure as I knew the starting gun was going off in 20 minutes, I knew that something had to happen right now to break the deadlock. As the police officer reached for his handcuffs, it was as though someone had hit the pause button on a VCR. Time seemed to stop. We were ordered to leave or be handcuffed and taken away to be thrown in jail. Jail! I was starting to hallucinate and was certain we would be mocked by the other

inmates, and the first cop we ran into would look familiar and be saying "See, I told you; ya ain't gonna make it!"

Finally a constructive comment from the onlookers: "There's another on-ramp 300 yards away – See if they'll let you through there!"

As we ran off we heard "Take that guy with you! He came all the way from Italy to run, and he's been sitting on that hill crying for the last 10 minutes." On the grassy embankment below the bridge on-ramp sat a man with an Italian flag above the registration number on his T-shirt. He had obviously been sobbing. Hugh grabbed him. "Buddy, don't give up," and the three of us ran off together. The crowd cheered.

17 minutes to go. Even if the cops at the alternate on-ramp allowed us onto the bridge, it would be touch-and-go. At the next bridge on-ramp sat an old yellow school bus, sent by marathon organizers to collect stragglers and strays. Like the Statue of Liberty nearby in the harbour, it symbolized hope for Hugh, Guido and me. It was our last chance.

By the time we made it to the front doors of the bus, six runners were lined up to get inside. The driver was yelling to the 50 or 60 runners on board to get to the back of the bus.

Just as Hugh placed one foot on the step, the driver called "Sorry, we're full; step back!" Hugh dove forward as I shoved him from behind. Guido slid in as well. Hugh inched his way up the stairs and squirmed back through the crowd while I sat on the second stair and attempted to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. The driver noticed only Guido and told him he would have to get off. Guido yelled something in Italian, which somehow resulted in the driver having a change of heart. The door swung shut against my left shoulder and arm.

11 minutes to race time. The bus was full of nervous chatter with runners exchanging stories of the tunnel accident and ferry breakdown. I couldn't believe the race hadn't even started and already we had pushed ourselves to the limit.

First off the bus, we ran toward the registration area – now a ghost town with no one to confirm our arrival. This would make our finishing times invalid. I ran to the Porta Potty for a quick pee and on my way back ran into a clipboard-carrying woman who looked official. Hearing our dilemma, she wrote down our numbers and promised to try to add them to the list of vetted entrants.

We joined the 26,000 runners with the countdown clock signaling less than two minutes to the start. Seven or eight helicopters swirled overhead, jockeying for position to capture a photograph of the dramatic stampede about to swarm over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Monday's New York Times cover would feature the shot, and two of those unrecognizable dots in the crowd would be Hugh and me.

With a minute to go I realized that our drive to make it to the start had become more important than the race itself. Nothing could beat the feeling of what we had already accomplished. For me, the sound of the starter's pistol was much sweeter than the satisfaction I was about to derive from the race itself.

After the start, Hugh and I lost each other in the crowd on the bridge, but somehow managed to reunite 25 miles down the road near the finish in Central Park. A breathless Hugh yelled out my name from behind, and caught up with me. We ran together for a few hundred yards. Then, in a burst, he swept to the finish line 30 seconds in front of me, exceeding his time expectation for his first-ever marathon. I ran a personal best of 3:54:00, shaving more than three minutes off my old record. Both of our accomplishments were official and recorded in the next day's paper along with the rest of the runners.

As far as I was concerned, our times were irrelevant. We had won the race before it began.