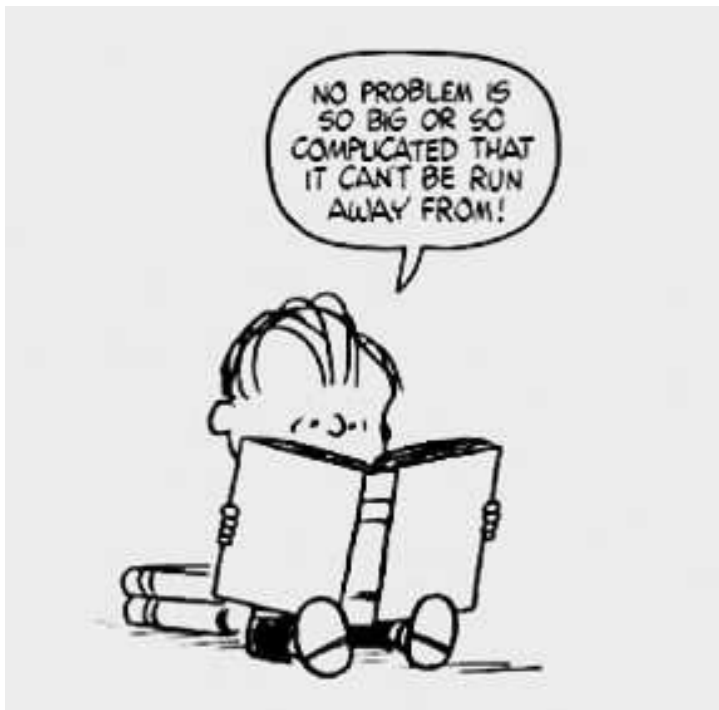


Viva Los Fun Hogs!

For my birthday this year, my running partner, coach, fellow fun hog and comrade in everything Bev Clark gave me a marathon. She didn't pay the entrance fee for me because there wasn't one. The marathon was self-organised, self sponsored and self-supported. But she gave me everything else, the route, the companionship, encouragement, endless, endless training runs, gym sessions, car drops, nutritious lunches and fortifying sundowners. What follows are a few days' journal entries from over five months of preparations.



Monday, 10 September 2012

When are you ever ready for anything? . . .

They say in running that whatever you do in training now will yield results in two weeks. In other words, if you're two weeks away from The Big Run and you don't feel ready it's too late. You're as ready as you're going to get. If that's the case, I've got just under one month to get as ready as I'm going to be for the marathon. With that, and a healthy chorus of "better late than never" ringing in my ears, I'm trying to knuckle down. My interest was sparked by a promise in Runner's World – a 50-minute Iron Strength routine which, done just twice a week, would transform me to Marathon Fit. I mentioned this to Bev as I was looking it up online, and a few hours later she shared a Guardian article with me – out loud. In it, British Olympic cyclist Victoria Pendleton discusses how difficult she was finding training in Switzerland. She needed to **Build Core Strength**, she decided (emphasis Bev's), and in so doing found a few new drills she started to do. When her coach found out, he was so angry with her that she began cutting herself with a Swiss Army Knife (irony duly noted) in despair over disappointing him. She was on the verge of quitting when she met a new coach, who helped turn things around for her. Bev reads this article to me "as a warning," as she puts it. When I ask whether it's a warning that I need to build core strength, or a warning that I shouldn't add things to my training programme without telling my coach (her), she just smiles enigmatically.

Friday, 14 September 2012

Mad dogs are some Zimbabweans . . .

This time of year, the sun is hot and constant. The sky is clear and blue. There isn't a cloud to be found for love or money, and the heat is unrelenting. Running past houses the hedges are dry and thin, and you can see farther into people's properties, into gardens, into hills, into the bush. It feels somehow wrong – like things are too exposed, or weak, or vulnerable. It's weeks or even months before the rains begin and things soften and grow again. In the meantime, even looking at the weather forecast feels pointless. You know what it will be – clear, sunny and 30, day in, day out. But the tababuya trees are stunning. It's their one week to shine, and they dominate the sky with thick, yellow clumps of flowers. I imagine doing a run based on them – run to one you can see, and from there choose another one you can see and run to it, then find another and run to it, on and on through the city.

Saturday, 15 September 2012

Talking through things can help . . .

Bev and I walk her dog Basta to hide our water for tomorrow's run, and we have a long conversation over breakfast about our concerns for The Big Run. Bev describes how her body gives out after 25ks or so, and is worried that she physically just won't be able to do it. Today I don't have any doubts that we can do it. I might wish it would take me closer to five hours than six. But I don't doubt our ability to finish. We walked the marathon distance in April this year. We've been doing our reading and we're following a program and we're being responsible. We're treating this distance with respect. We are probably more prepared for this run than we have been for many of our other challenging runs.

Sunday, 23 September 2012

Closing your mouth while running isn't such good advice . . .

It's the ones you think will be easy that give you the most trouble. Isn't that always the case? After last Sunday's 30km run, and a steady upward increase in mileage for months, I looked at this week's programme, saw the long run was "only" 21ks, and started to fantasise about all the ways in which I would whip around that half marathon route with a smile on my face. A few things, clearly, slipped my mind, including:

- a) The run was meant to be a "fast finish long run," meaning that you get progressively faster as you go along. On every run I have ever been on, I have gotten progressively Slower as I go along
- b) A half marathon is not something I ever have, or ever will, "whip around." Even at my very best, it's a more than two hour run. And two hours at a trot is hardly an easy thing. Ever.
- c) The Heat. According to Runner's World, at temperatures over 17 degrees, you start to lose speed. It was at least 33 degrees by the end of our run.

Instead of the “fast finish” 21ks the training programme recommended, or even a strong, confident personal best, the run was slower than ever. Highlights included crossing Enterprise Road and passing two guys walking the other direction. “Try to close your mouth,” one called after me. Right.

Wednesday, 26 September 2012

Frank, love made visible . . .

15 years or so ago, Bev met Frank, a black and tan Doberman/Rotweiler type cross she'd found on a cycle ride with her nephew Devin and her partner Brenda, not too far from their house. He was young and thin and sniffing through the rubbish. Brenda scooped the pup under one arm and cycled him back home, away from a neglectful family and into a household that is surely rated as one of Harare's Top 5 Houses To Be A Pet. He became a handsome, happy, gentle, loving dog. I met Frank more than ten years ago, and have cuddled and hugged and kissed and walked and petted him on countless occasions. Growing up, I loved dogs but we weren't allowed pets. So for years I adopted other people's dogs into my own heart, a growing collection of love of which Frank was a central actor. But on Sunday, Frank started to choke often, on Monday he was having trouble breathing, and by Tuesday he was so weak he couldn't stand on his own. Bev took him to the vet on Monday, where Frank was x-rayed and diagnosed with an enlarged heart and fluid in his lungs. She was given a host of tablets and took him home. When she took him back to the vet on Tuesday, the doctor shook his head. Frank was old. He'd had a good innings, and it was time to say goodbye. I know Bev and I both had heavy hearts today, running and remembering so many moments with Frank.

Friday, 28 September 2012

Give up, carry on, give up, and carry on . . .

Bev and I left my car at the gym in the morning, planning to run from the office to the gym at lunchtime. As we left the office, I gave her my car keys, so that she could get her gym things out of the car when she got there before me. As she took the key from me she said “But let's run together today.” I smiled and nodded. But inside, I was thinking – this is always my intention. Each run, I set out to run together. And invariably, I fail. Sure enough, it didn't take long before Bev was well ahead of me. She turned back once to show me where to turn at the intersection ahead, and off she went. She looked strong and competent and in control. The day was hot, and meanwhile I was struggling just to keep moving forward. Turning off and walking to the gym was hugely tempting. Trudging my way up Kew Drive, I cried. If I can't even run 7ks with any decent pace or form, how will I ever manage something longer? The marathon is three weeks away, and I don't feel any stronger, any more fit, any more capable than I did five months ago. A friend of mine once described his efforts to learn to play the piano. He didn't want to be a concert pianist, but he did want to be able to play a few pieces well – technically proficiently and with feeling. For years he took lessons, and practiced an hour a day, religiously. But he didn't feel like he ever got any better. Every note was still a struggle. And so he stopped cold, accepting that this must just be something he wasn't made for. Sometimes I wonder how much longer I should give running before I accept something similar about myself.

Sunday, 30 September 2012

Try running . . .

The jacarandas are in full flight, bursts of purple against the brown, green and blue of the sky and other trees. Where the blossoms fall, the brown and red dust is coated with lilac. They're soft underfoot and I love the sound as they pop if you run over them just right. This is on the schedule as the longest run of the training program – 33ks. Bev gives me the route and a detailed program of when to walk, when to sip, and when to snack. Shuffling barely a third of the way into it, I knew it was just going to take forever. Comments from passing motorists included “Keep Walking!” and “Try Running!” Ah, well.

Wednesday, 4 October 2012

Surviving punishment . . .

We took a friend to the airport and sat waiting for her flight in the morning. I had half a sandwich and a coke, not realising how quickly she'd want to go through the gate and how soon we'd leave. So less than an hour later, Bev and I set off for our run. The plan: 10 minute warm up, run up and down a hill a lot, and then 10 minute cool down back. I pump my arms furiously as I run up the hills; my legs don't seem to move any faster. I sigh with relief as I jog back down them, and then repeat. I desperately want to lie down in the shade and weep, but I put my head down and keep going. Bev laps me, and laps me again. Eventually, she asks me how many I've done. I shake my head. I have no idea. It's true. I haven't been counting. I've been surviving. Finally, I look up and can't see Bev any more – so I finish the hill and shuffle my way back, punishment survived. I feel like I'm getting a whole new appreciation for the notion of distance running as an endurance activity. It's something you endure. You don't always enjoy it. It is not always fun. But you hunker down, and you just get through it.

Wednesday, 10 October 2012

Running brings out the best in us . . .

"Have you got a stone?" I ask Bev as we set off. On our last run, she'd gotten hacked off with some badly driving, skirt-staring-at kombi driver, and shouted a few choice words at him. Unsurprisingly, he'd hurtled a few insults of his own back at her. I was close enough still to watch the exchange, but entirely helpless to stop it. I was just grateful Bev hadn't had a rock on her to throw at the kombi driver, and that it had all ended with words. I wasn't near enough later in the run to see her lose it again with a car driving up the cycle track. I mean sure, what is a car doing driving up a cycle track anyway? "Nice bicycle," she shouted as she went past, striking the bonnet with her fist. A woman we've met at the gym says she prefers to run on the treadmill because she doesn't feel safe running on the streets. She's not worried about pedestrians hurting her, though; she's worried about the cars. She has a fair point. But I reckon the cars have as much to worry about Bev loose on the streets as a runner as any runner has to worry about a car.

Sunday, 14 October 2012

Feeling magical . . .

Yesterday, we got the first storm of the season, and it was a beauty - lightning, thunder, wind, and hours and hours of pouring rain. Running in the early cloudy Sunday morning, Harare feels different, and I feel privileged to get to see her like this, softer and gentler. The usual harsh edges of dust and heat and sun are muted, and everything feels clean and new. The storm knocked the jacaranda blossoms off in hundreds, and they lay on the ground like a soft, purple blanket. From a distance, they look like snow. The cloud cover remains, making the morning cooler than it's been in months. Everything about the run feels magical, and I breathe it in gratefully.

Tuesday, 16 October 2012

People wanted a name . . .

With the Big Run just days away, logistical preparations are in full swing. Route planning has gone back and forth between Bev's desk (map book + notepad) and my desk (Bev's hand written route plotted to gauge the distance), and back and forth and back and forth again. The proposed route for the Viva Los Fun Hogs (Inaugural) Marathon [people wanted a name] changed 5 times – 44.6ks, 36.8ks, up and down, until we settled on a 43.2km route. Sure, a marathon is actually 42.2ks. But hey, what's an extra kilometer!

Viva Los Fun Hogs (Inaugural) Marathon – Final Route

L Alfred Road
L Arcturus
L Enterprise
R Hurworth
R Kew
L Ridgeway
R Borrowdale Road
L Armadale
R Glenelg
L Doone
R Alpes
L Bargate
L Garlands Ride
R Pendennis
L Twickenham
L Harare Drive
L Second Street Extension
L Arundel School Road
R Quorn
L The Chase
R College
L Churchill
R Borrowdale Road
L Ruth Taylor
L Watson
R Arden
L Old Road
L Drew
L Collins
R Harare Drive
L Wallis
R Balgowan
R Belant
L Harare Drive
R Coghlan
L Court
R Cambridge
L Dulwich
R Arcturus
L Alfred

Some years back, Bev and I read 180 Degrees South, and this inspired the name of our run. In it, a band of care free adventurers surf, climb, drive and video their way up and down the Pacific Coast of the Americas – from California down to Argentina. They seem an unlikely band of adventurers, but what they lack in skill and experience they seem to make up for with enthusiasm. Their motto is “it’s not an adventure unless something goes wrong.” But somehow they always manage to pull through – much to the relief of their fans and family, who sometimes stand on the sidelines with a banner: **Viva Los Fun Hogs!**

Thursday, 18 October 2012

Whatever gets you through it? . . .

We set off this morning – Bev, her dog Basta (Number One Fun Hog), and myself – to drop off the water and snack packs for the Big Run. A bit like the Sunday runs in our training program, Bev has taken the snacking and nutrition planning for the marathon very seriously. She has several pages of notes, which she's photocopied and shared with me for me to memorise, and she consults them regularly. They include a hydration plan, nutrition plan, schedule of rests for mind and body, what to carry, and a supplies / shopping list. In the office yesterday, she laid out all of the supplies and began to pack snack bags, each one carefully labeled with its number, location and distance marker: Stop 2, 14ks, Pendennis. There was a slight wobble when she realised the shopping list said 3 bananas. And she'd only bought 2. "Those two are big bananas though," I managed to convince her. "Plus you can take a few Rand and get some from a vendor on the way." When she goes out I slip notes into the bags that I hope she'll find . . . a version of long distance water point moral support. We spend Thursday morning driving through the city with our map, snacks in the back, Basta wide eyed and ready for Fun. We park, take the dog out, and try to look inconspicuous as we walk around looking for exactly the right hiding spot – my pockets stuffed with two bottles of water, a bottle of energy drink, and a plastic packet of jelly babies, bananas, power bars and other treats. Looking around carefully to make sure no one could see us, we get tense with each other trying to find the right spot, the right timing, and make the drop some place where we'll actually get it back from. We've learnt a lot these past few months, we realise. Bougainvilleas and spiky aloes are the most popular wall hedges. They're great places to stash things in – but a mission to get things out of unscathed. It's easy to hide a brand new, sealed, bottle of water just about anywhere, and find it the next day. Rubbish is so plentiful on the streets, even if someone does see your bottle in the distance it just looks like more rubbish.

After the drop offs, we sit for a coffee and try to record where we've hidden what.

Bev: Stop 6, that third pink bougainvillea after the tree in the wall. Is that where we hid the strawbs or the jelly babies?

Me: That one has strawbs.

Bev: Yay. Strawbs. I **need** to know where those are!

Bev: The energeade we hid on Harare Drive – that's the one at the start of the hill, right?

Me: Well. I'd consider it more like the middle of the hill. But it might feel like the start to you.

Bev: Okay, whatever. How will I Find it?

Me: Yeah the aloes look a lot alike. But it's just after the prickly pear with the yellow flowers. And it's the aloe just to the left of the one with the unused sanitary towel spiked onto it.

Bev tries to give me some last minute coaching and advice, but I'm too anxious to hear it. I don't want to think about the run, but I can think about nothing else. I don't want to talk about the run, but I can't talk about anything else. It just needs to be Over, I tell her. It needs to be done. After I drop Bev off, I go out to work on her surprise. I have coloured chalk, and I want to leave messages for her on the route. I try and draw them where I know she'll be – on the side of the road as we turn, on the verge of a busy road. She's told me where her toughest spot is, the part of the road where we're farthest from home, before the loop bends back towards the familiar, so I make sure to leave some encouragement there.

Friday, 19 October 2012

Happy Birthday . . .

The text messages start coming in whilst I'm still sleeping. Happy Birthday! Enjoy the run! And I realise I'd been so nervous and unhappy and anxious about the run; I'd forgotten it was my birthday as well. As I went through my morning routine – bath, teeth, dress (running clothes under normal clothes so the dogs don't realise what I'm going to do), coffee, yogurt, rehearse the route in my head for the umpteenth time, tell myself I Can Do It for the gazillionth time – it begins to register. Yes, it is my birthday! And actually, I want to enjoy the day. We're due to set off at 8. Other runner friends think we're mad, that this is too late, and it's already too hot in the day. But I figure at the rate I go, by the time I finish it will be insufferably hot no matter what. And do I really want to wake up at 4am to save a degree or two later? Not particularly. Bev's asked me to be at her place for 7:45 so that we start on time. But I'm so nervous I'm parked outside her gate by 7:20. I change, put on my shoes, stretch, wee, stretch, wee again, check the route, pretend to stretch, check the time, pretend to stretch some more, and keep trying to remind myself to Think Positive. Bev greets me with a birthday hug, and we set off. She's wearing what she knows is my favourite running vest – smile, it says on the back, if I can stay close enough to see it.

As we turn down Arcturus we pass a man we've often seen walking his black Labrador, and I take a deep breath. It's all going to be okay, I tell myself. Bev stops for a wee a bit further down, so we're still together when we cross Enterprise. But as we turn onto Kew and she powers ahead, I know I'm in for a long solo run.

Goodbye, I wave to her in my head, 4 kilometers down and only 39 to go.

At Borrowdale School they're having a sports day, school kids in house colours run back and forth on the field, and the pool is decked out with flags and pennants.

On Armadale, a smiling Jack Russell comes tearing around the corner and bounds up to me. I stop to shoo it home but it keeps running with me, smiling. I stop to take a look at it, and realise it has a collar and a nametag. So I turn and run back, looking for Pirate's gate. The houses are badly numbered, and I'm worried he'll run off again. Eventually I pick him up and tuck him under my arm, and trot back in the opposite direction until I find his gate. He licks my hand and squirms a bit, but mostly seems happy for the company. I ring the buzzer, and on the other end of the intercom, a woman sounds delighted to have her dog back. She opens the gate; I dump Pirate in, and wave when he looks back at me as the gate closes.

At our first water point, my heart drops. I **know** we've left the water under the dead grass mulch at this wispy bush. But where is it. In despair, I kick at clumps of brown grass. Just as I'm about to give up, I find the bottle, so well hidden Bev also struggled to find it, she tells me later.

On Glenelg, I'm disappointed that I can barely make out the graffiti I'd chalked for Bev the day before. Too many cars have driven over it rubbing it out until it's so faint I can only see it because I know where it should be.

The weather has been kind so far, cloudy even, but the clouds are beginning to thin and the heat is building. As I run past the vlei on Bargate, I realise I'm hardly a quarter of the way there. As I turn onto Harare Drive, there is chalk graffiti on the road: Rolling in the Deep, it says. I know it's Bev, and I stop to take it in. Instead of a water point with music playing, she's given me a song to add to the imaginary play list in my head. I press play and sing it to myself as I go. A little bit further on, I get to Bev's low point, and I'm thrilled to see that the graffiti has survived. She's given me a boost, and I've given her one.

Second Street Extension feels hot and endless. I have a moment, running under a billboard, a large Apostolic prayer service in full swing, white robes praying in the open vlei, cars driving past me with people on their way to work, or doing chores, or taking children to school, or whatever else they have to be doing, of feeling so grateful to be running, so fortunate to get to spend my Friday like this, to get to see the city like this. But it's fleeting and hard to hold onto, and I try to think of a new song to sing.

Near the Mount Pleasant District Hall, we've hidden one of our treat packets in a daisy bush under the watchful eye of several enormous giraffe sculptures. In addition to the water and jelly babies, this includes a Lucozade – which I discover is a bit like Appletizer – fizzy and sweet.

On The Chase, I see the most beautiful flamboyant I've seen yet, red and luscious. I'm just past the half way mark and I'm starting to flag. The heat is getting to me, and I'm counting the hours still left in my head, wondering where Bev is.

On Ruth Taylor, I pass a shirtless man with thick heavy dreadlocks, belly spilling over his jeans, watering his garden shirtless . . . "I wish I was you," he calls out to me, from the comfort of his home, garden hose in hand, smile broad. I look at him like he's mad. I am hours and hours from home, from comfort, from a cool garden hose or a refrigerator of cold water. I smile at him, shake my head in disbelief, and ask him to spray me down with the hose.

I cannot get to the fourth water stop on Enterprise soon enough. I don't remember what's in the packet, but in my head it is going to save me. So I'm disappointed when I open the bag and don't see anything that appeals. In fairness, nothing would appeal at this stage. So I grab the water, eat my jelly babies, suck on a gel, and carry on up the road. By Enterprise and Glenara though my stomach is cramping. I walk for a while, then try to run, and find it still cramping. Back and forth I jog / walk, slowly making my way up Enterprise.

When I get to the café at Triton gym, I pull in to buy another bottle of water. Ages ago, we told the friendly, woman behind the counter that we were training for a marathon. She asks me how the running is going. It's okay I smile wanly. And the marathon she asks. It's today, actually, I tell her shyly. She doesn't believe me. No it really is, I insist – look at my watch. See – 31ks. So where is everyone else she wants to know. It's just me and my friend, it's my birthday today, and this is my present. Happy Birthday she tells me, just 11ks to go!

And I'm back on the road.

I trudge my way slowly forward, alternating between feeling so ready for the thing to just be over already, and doing my level best not to think about it at all. As I grind up Harare Drive, I get to the spiky aloe near the sanitary towel, and avoid stabbing myself too badly as I drag out some chewy strawbs. I make sure to do the loop of Wallis – Balgowan – Belant Bev had added, even though at this stage it feels like it's taking me in entirely the wrong direction. But I'm scared she'll have a checkpoint there, or a trick of some sort, and I don't want to get caught out.

Finally, I'm on Cambridge, hauling myself up Dulwich, and I spill out onto Arcturus, to run the last flat bit back to Bev's house. As I turn onto her road, I realise I really will finish this, that I really have done it! Briefly, the stomach

cramps and sore legs stop mattering. All I can feel is a soaring delight, a relief, and the elation of Yes. I really have done this. Months and months of thinking I can't, proven wrong in a few hours.

As I turn into Bev's driveway, I find a finishing tape stretched across her gate. She's made me a banner: Viva Los Fun Hogs Inaugural 43.2. She takes a picture of me approaching, the only run of my life where I will ever get to the finishing tape first. After I've had a swim and changed my clothes, she gives me a race t-shirt, and a medal – just like a “real race.” She'd made them herself earlier in the week to make the run feel more special, to commemorate the accomplishment even more.

Monday, 22 October 2012

Why stop there . . .

I texted Bev today: “For my birthday next year, please can I have an ultra.” We've got 362 days to prepare. Surely 50ks isn't that unthinkable?