

# MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

## They Were Cheating Only Themselves

The story is known to some of our members, especially among those who ran the 2005 Marine Corps Marathon (MCM). There were eight women, of what is considered to be “middle age,” setting out to run their first marathon. By about the 10-mile mark, they were walking. In danger of missing the time cut-off to receive a medal upon crossing the finish line, apparently with the encouragement of one of the organizers of their group, they skipped four miles of the course. They made the cut-off time at the finish and received their medals.

After their actions were observed by one or more eye-witnesses, the race director was contacted. Return of the medals was requested and granted (with a statement on the MCM Web site). The particular charity for which this group of participants trained and raised money was banned from the 2006 MCM “for lack of professionalism and unethical conduct.” Certainly the lack of professionalism by the organization and the unethical conduct of both organization and competitors are the principal issues. But there are others, which have to do with feelings about self and with goal-setting in endurance sports for the non-elite athlete (i.e., most of us).

In my view, it is important for both the potential competitor and the person(s) advising them to think about the goal-setting process very carefully. I think that if they do, this kind of happening can be avoided, even without taking into account the ethical considerations (which are surely important). One possible goal is to get a finisher’s medal, in and of itself. Another is fin-

ishing the marathon, regardless of time. If these folks had simply continued their pace, they would likely have been permitted to unofficially finish the race and it appears they could have physically made the 26.2 miles. No medals, but a finish in their first marathon. That is a major achievement in of itself, regardless of time.

In advance, one ought to think about what is really important. If you focus first on the bit of metal, you could contemplate on what it would mean to get it without actually having to finish the race. If you got the medal but didn’t do the race, would you want to show it off as if you had? Would you claim that you had done the whole thing when you knew that you had not? But supposing you finished the race—over-time—and didn’t get the medal. Wouldn’t you then be able to say proudly how you had finished your first marathon, within the time-limit or not, and that you were thinking, possibly, about what you would do in your training next year to be able to finish *and* get the medal?

Let me share some personal experience in this matter with you. It’s not to tell you what a “great guy I am” but to share feelings that I have had in the course of 23 years doing triathlons. I have started the Ironman distance event (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run) five times; I have finished three. On the two I didn’t finish, I got about half-way through the marathon, ran out of time, was on courses that were to be officially closed, and called it a night (when you’re doing the marathon leg at night, in a country setting, you really don’t want to be out there by yourself). No official finish, no medal, but hey, I was out on the course for a long time and for me, that still counts as

something significant. On my last Ironman, I was over the cut-off time when I got in from the bike, but was permitted to go on to the marathon because I had crew. I finished that one in 19:20. It was as good an experience as my two where I received medals. I was out on the course for a loooong time but I stuck with it, and made it. I achieved my number one goal that day:

I crossed the finish line, whether or not it was official. It felt really good then and it still does.

And so, I suggest thinking carefully about goal-setting. What is important? What is feasible and realistic? Should I set just one goal, in this case getting the medal, or should I set a second as a fall-back? Do I simply want to finish the race, with or without a medal? After the race is over, in which situation will I feel better about myself? Could I contentedly switch goals during the race? After all, regardless of what happens out there on a given day, there is always another race.

As always, I welcome any comments you may have on this topic or any other presented in the *AMAA Journal*. Send your comments to [amaa@american-running.org](mailto:amaa@american-running.org).

Respectfully yours,  
Steven Jonas

P.S. A letter was submitted to the editor from Dr. Michael Yessis regarding the *Consensus Statement of the 1st International Exercise-Associated Hyponatremia Consensus Development Conference*. He raises several points that are worthy of consideration; we will run his comments in the next issue of the *AMM Journal*.