A Parable of Two Brothers

Terry Sergeant

Once upon a time there were two brothers named Darrell and Daryl. Darrell and the Other Daryl (people called him "Odie" for short) were twins who seemed identical in almost every way. As they grew up they shared common interests and activities, so it was no surprise that when the time came for them to leave home and seek their fortunes that both brothers attended the same university and pursued the same major, and even enjoyed having the same course schedule. One of the courses in which they enrolled was entitled "Marathoning 101" and was taught by a wise and experienced instructor.

Marathoning 101 was one of the Wise Instructor's favorite courses. It required students to work hard, but seeing their bodies and minds transformed was a rewarding experience. Upon completion of the course diligent students typically felt a great sense of accomplishment. Some would go on to take other running courses, while some would be relieved to be able to get that course "out of the way." Nevertheless students who completed the course were almost always changed.

On the first day of "Marathoning 101" the Wise Instructor gave the following assignment:

> Go to the school track and run as far as you can in 12 minutes. Record the results of this "12 minute test" and compare them to the fitness chart handed out in class. Be prepared to report your results in class.

Darrell completed the assignment as instructed and compared his results to the chart. He began imagining how he would improve as the semester went along and he looked forward to the next class period in which the instructor would discuss the results.

Odie, on the other hand, was so busy getting used to college life that he failed to complete the assignment. "That assignment is just busy work," he reasoned. "And besides, this is a marathoning course not a 12 minute running course!" Although Odie did not complete the the assignment he did not want to get a bad grade in the course. So, he approached his new friend, Charlie, to request a favor.

"Hi, Charlie. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing well, but a bit tired from our first assignment. I didn't start on it until after midnight and by the time I finished it, showered, and my heart rate slowed down, it was nearly 2:00 a.m."

"Yeah, whatever. Say ... I didn't exactly finish that assignment and I don't have a clue how far a person can go in 12 minutes, you know what I mean? Could you, maybe, tell me about how far you went so I'll be in the right ball park. I won't use your answer exactly, so the instructor won't know you told me anything."

Charlie, not wanting to be a bad friend, reluctantly did as he was asked. During class the next day students reported their results and the instructor assigned grades. Odie was relieved that he was given an "A" on his first assignment.

As the semester progressed the Wise Instructor spent class time discussing important topics such as fitness assessment, training principles, shoe selection, race rules, and race strategies, but he knew that no amount of discussion could replace the necessity of the students actually spending time running. After several "small" homework assignments the instructor gave the following assignment: "Run 20 miles. Due date: 1 week."

Darrell, being new to running, found the assignment a bit intimidating and he nervously approached the instructor with his concerns.

"I don't think I can run 20 miles. I'm thinking about dropping this class. I don't know what to do."

The Wise Instructor gave this reply: "Darrell, you don't have to run the 20 miles all at once. In fact, I would encourage you not to run them all at once. Don't think that this assignment will be easy, however. It will require sweat and determination. There will be times when you will need to stop and rest. Remember that a beautiful thing happens when you get proper amounts of sleep at night. Your body revives itself, your muscles gain mass, and your energy is renewed. When you get up the next morning you are not only refreshed, but you are stronger than you were the day before! We are probably a bit early in the semester for you to be in a panic. Approach this assignment incrementally and you will learn a lot."

Encouraged by the Wise Instructor's words, Darrell decided to stick with the course a bit longer and he set about planning how he would complete the assignment. His plan was to run 6 miles the first day and then take a day off. The third and fourth days he would run 4 miles each and then 3 miles each on the fifth and sixth days. On the seventh day he would rest.

Odie's approach to the assignment was a bit different. He waited until the night before the assignment was due to begin working on it. He then set out to run 20 miles. After 6 miles Odie gave up. During his exhausting walk back to his dormitory room he planned his excuses for the next day. When class began the next day many students in the class eagerly shared their experiences and discussed their strategies for completing the assignment. Odie, however, came to class with his fists swinging and his tongue wagging.

"Teacher! The assignment you gave was too difficult. Your expectations are too high. We're just beginners at this. How on earth are you expecting us to run 20 miles so early in the semester? My friends Charlie and Fred couldn't do the assignment either. Can you give us another couple of days to finish the 20 miles?"

The Wise Instructor recognized that Odie and his two friends failed because of their poor strategy and their lack of effort. He gently reminded them of the advice given in class regarding the assignment.

The semester continued and other assignments followed. Darrell continued attending class, taking notes, working hard, resting adequately, planning carefully, and acting with integrity. Most importantly, however, Darrell remained focused on the objective of the course: learning to run a marathon. The result was that by the end of the semester Darrell was strong and fit and prepared to face the final exam: a 26 mile run.

Odie, however, did not focus on learning. His class attendance was spotty, his notes were gappy,[1] his rest was restless, he took frequent shortcuts on his assignments, he seldom broke a sweat, and his focus was on all that did not pertain to marathoning.

The end of the semester arrived almost as quickly as it had begun. During the week leading up to the final exam Darrell began tapering his workouts in accordance with the training guidelines presented in class. The night before the exam he went to bed early and woke the next morning prepared for a marathon.

Odie, however, had become somewhat concerned about his "Marathoning 101" grade. "I'll just have to make sure I nail the final exam," he reasoned. The night before the final exam Odie began his preparation. He began preparation at 10:00 pm and he ran for an hour an a half straight. Knowing he was not yet prepared he set his alarm for early in the morning. After four hours of sleep the alarm went off and he dragged himself out of bed and ran four more miles.

The exam went as expected. Darrell had the run of his life. Not only did he ace the final exam, but he finished the semester with a hard-earned "A" in the most challenging course of his life. Odie, exhausted from his last-minute preparations, completed only 3 miles.

Odie recognized that he was doomed to an "F" in the course and decided that his only chance

[1] i.e., they had lots of gaps ... a malady that commonly accompanies spotty attendance

to get a passing grade would be to talk to the Wise Instructor. Although Odie had a lot he wanted to say to the Wise Instructor he decided to cut to the chase: "I know I failed the final exam, but I worked harder to prepare for this exam than for any exam in my entire life. Is there anything I can do to pass this course?" he asked the Wise Instructor.

"Well, Odie, the semester is over."

"Yeah, but can't I do some extra credit or something?"

"Odie, your feet are blistered because you failed to purchase appropriate shoes as we discussed in class. You ignored the training principles that we discussed. If you had attended class you would have known the guidelines for proper nutrition. You took shortcuts on many assignments I gave throughout the semester and simply failed to do others. Preparing to run a marathon requires training sustained over a significant period of time. There is no 'easy' way to become a marathon runner. The bottom line is that you are not fit to run a marathon."

Odie pondered the words of the Wise Instructor and after a long pause asked, "But ... what do I need to do to pass the course?"

"Take the course course again ... and this time be a FATHEAD!"[2]

[2] see the document entitled "How to Be a FATHEAD" for more information.