

# The Professor and Mr. Laid-Back Run Into Trouble

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It would be the father's 70th marathon, the son's first. Surely the son would heed the father's training advice, would he not? No, he would not. Race day was a shock. But not in the way either expected

BY JOSH DEAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN FINKE





**THE DEAN TEAM**

On Main Street in their hometown of Frostburg, Maryland, the author and his dad, David, set out for a crucial long training run.

# When I fiked up my laptop

one September morning a few months back, the following e-mail awaited me:

*Hey. I wonder how you are going to squeeze a marathon in with your schedule. Seriously, I do not think you have a clue how far 26.2 miles is and what you will feel like at 20 miles. OK, OK. I know we will not be running at an 8-minute pace (3:30 finish) or even a 9-minute pace (which gets one finished at 4 hours), but you really do not want to be walking in at 6 hours. Yep, I am hassling you a bit, but if you do not put in at least 2 long runs of 18 miles or so before the race (and NOT the last weekend before the race), you are going to have a very, very long day and I might as well stop for bacon and eggs along the way while you run (?) ahead and I catch up later. Granted you have youth on your side—and that is important—but youth will only take you so far. OK, I will let this all “rest.” Whatever happens, happens. And who knows, with my shaky hamstring, it might be you pushing me! Love, Dad.*

Clearly, he was on to me.

It was 60 days before the ING New York City Marathon, the race that for more than a year I had promised my dad I would run alongside him, no exceptions. The race that, like any marathon, requires training and preparation and at least a moderate attention to details, like following a specific training plan that does not include chicken wings or long nights on a barstool. Up to this point I had done a fraction of the work a true marathoner should do—and my dad could tell.

My father, David Dean, lives in Frostburg, a small college town in western Maryland, six hours from my home in lower Manhattan. We are close but don't actually speak often; we communicate semiregularly by e-mail but probably only once a month, at best, on the phone.

Still, his suspicions were accurate. With just over eight weeks until marathon day, I'd yet to run more than eight miles. For the better part of July

and August, I had tried to train, but realized that, well, I hated it: The pain, the boredom, the repetition of the same route, the same iPod playlists, the same buildingscape, the same sweated pugles crapping on the sidewalk. My regimen had consisted of unenthusiastic three- and four-mile runs, with an occasional six-miler tossed in, after which I often announced to whomever I happened to see first that, despite all evidence to the contrary, I was going to run a four-and-a-half-hour marathon.

My father, as we now have established, had his doubts. One, because he's my dad, and privy to certain inescapable realities of my being: That I am not entirely motivated, particularly when it comes to things I don't care for. And two, because he is a runner. Fifty years from now, when I am prodded awake in my Barcalounger and asked to talk about my dad, I'll say that he was a warm and funny guy who loved his family, teaching history, and seeing the world. I'll say that he wrote some really good books

## FATHER KNOWS BEST

Throughout the buildup to marathon day, Dean Sr. chided his son to take the distance seriously.



and I'll say, maybe before I say any of that other stuff, that he was a runner. "Since I started running in 1979," he once told me, "I've run over 63,000 miles."

The house I grew up in Frostburg is in part a museum to my father's running life. In the study there's a first-place trophy—"60 and over"—from the 2002 Johnstown (Pa.) Marathon and a mug from the Two Oceans ultramarathon in Cape Town, South Africa. On the wall of family photos there's one of Dad crossing the finish at his first Comrades Marathon in 1986. Both feet are in the air. It is one of the happiest moments of his life; just glimpse at his expression to see that. And on the walls leading to the basement there are posters from races around the world, including Marine Corps, Belfast, and the 2005 New York City Marathon.

It was during that last race when I had my brainstorm, or should I say brainlock. Like pretty much everyone else in New York, I went out to watch the marathon that Sunday. Race day is a huge, citywide party, with people spilling onto the streets, waving banners and shouting for runners they've never seen before. As you watch, you can't help but think, *What if?* I mean, the crowds are so big, the energy so overwhelming—if there's one race that anyone can suffer through, *Why not me?*

The answer to that, rationally, was obvious: Because I detest running. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized there was a reason I had to try it. By doing something so seemingly ridiculous (to me, and to pretty much anyone who knew me), I could, perhaps, begin to understand why my dad does what he does. Why for 30 years he has punished his body again and again, with no reward beyond a bagful of finishers' medals, a wall of photos, and some silly trophies? Surely, there's some pleasure in it. It's just too difficult to imagine otherwise.

So I did something crazy: I suggested we run the New York City Marathon together. Before I knew it, I was on the hook.

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*Hi. Are u back home? Working on what? Any running???? November is creeping up on us. I am running an hour a day 4 days a week and am up to 90 minutes on Sat a.m. Will try and stretch that to near 2 hours this Sat. If you are still up for the NYC Marathon, we need to talk at some point re your training etc. and maybe I can offer you some suggestions. Love, Dad.*

For the longest time, it was an abstract concept that sounded great when I said it aloud: *I'm going to run the marathon! With my dad!* Nearly half the year passed and I rarely considered the frightening reality of what I'd committed to. Before making the pledge, I was lucky to run twice a week on the treadmill—vanity forced me to go to the gym, but I survived on the machine for no more than a half hour. By May, though, I was actually running outdoors more than once a week.

As the months ticked by, the e-mail frequency increased. Because my dad lived so far away, it was unrealistic for us to train together. Instead, we would train individually and then meet in mid-October for one long run. In the meantime, he would provide a sort of counsel from afar. I figured he could both teach and nag me, and he took to both jobs with vigor. To avoid cramps on



## Battle of the Ages

How the author and his dad stacked up heading into their marathon showdown

	DAVID DEAN, <i>father</i>	JOSH DEAN, <i>son</i>
HOMETOWN	Frostburg, Maryland	New York City
VITAL STATS	age 64; 5'10", 143lbs.	age 33; 5'11", 180 lbs.
OCCUPATION	Professor of history	Writer
MARATHONS ENTERED	69 ( <i>medals from several races are pictured above</i> )	Zero
MARATHON PR	3:16	TBD
AVERAGE MILES/WEEK	30 miles	12 miles
ESSENTIAL GEAR	Custom-made orthotics	iPod Nano and Nike+
HYDRATION	Lemon-lime Accelerade	Water
RUNNING HERO	Bruce Fordyce ( <i>nine-time Comrades winner</i> )	David Dean
RUNNING HANDICAPS	Bad back, overpronation, pigeon-toed	Laziness, procrastination
RUNNING EDGE	Too deaf to hear Josh's complaints	Younger legs, stubbornness
RUNNING MANTRA	"One must run rain or shine—or hungover."	"Running sucks."

race day, he wrote me, "Three days before the race I want you to eat a handful of pretzels each day." He insisted I practice carrying a Gatorade bottle during runs so that it would not be too onerous on race day. When he heard that I ate GU without water, he scolded me. "That's not good. You should be carrying it for 10 minutes in your hand to warm it so that it's easier to get down." I listened to him, because running is, after all, what he does.

My father came to the sport around the time that he and my mom split up in 1979. I don't remember this period—I was 6—but it was apparently a tough time, and he found an outlet for his angst in the new hobby. Those lonely hours trotting Frostburg's hills ("trotting" was my grandmother's word for it) helped



### BRIDGING THE GAP

With the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge—the marathon's start—looming, father and son take a few moments to relax.

the epic 55-miler known as Comrades. That first year, dad ran Comrades so fast—in nine hours, 15 minutes—that Polly and I missed him at the finish. We worried he was still stuck out there, cramped up in a thorn bush. Instead he was back at the hotel, waiting for us with a huge smile and a desperate urge for a beer. “My friends told me I’d finish with tears in my eyes, and I did,” he recalled. “It’s the only time that’s ever happened.”

When he and Polly returned to the United States in 1987, the running didn’t slow down. He did Marine Corps, Pittsburgh, and Allentown, among others. Then came another stint in South Africa (when, at age 51, he ran a 94-minute half-marathon), followed by a teaching tour in Ireland, which meant he had to run Dublin and Belfast. He headed back to South Africa, in 1998. That next spring, he ran his final Comrades.

By the time he turned 64 and was training to run New York City with me, David Dean, my father, had run 54 marathons and 15 ultras. Since he refused to treat them differently, he counted his total as 69 marathons. New York would be 70.

None of this love for running rubbed off on me.

As long as I can remember, I have been bemused by his obsession—wanting to see some point to it, but never actually finding one. I was a soccer player, and it is a universal tenet of soccer practice that before anyone touches a ball, all participants must run one or perhaps two lazy laps around the field in which corners are cut and the shorts of teammates are tugged.

In college, I can remember running only during intramural games, and once or twice from campus security. There was also the time I forgot to set the parking brake and the rusty Honda Civic hatchback Dad had given me rolled down a hill behind the library, across a lawn, and into a stone wall outside a girls’ dorm. I ran fast, but it didn’t matter. Man, was he pissed.

We’re different in other ways, too. He is a doer; I am a procrastinator. He likes to worry; I’m a fan of the *laissez-faire*. A favorite story among the Deans is this one, which is temporally unspecific. It refers to pretty much any fight between my father and me, starting, well, about the age when I was both ambulatory and able to speak in sentences. I would be sent off to sit in a chair in my room and stare at the corner in silence for a predetermined time, typically, 10 minutes—or a century to a tyke. “Every time you open your mouth,” he’d say, “it’s five more minutes.” There is a steep set of stairs off the kitchen with 12 or so steps. By the time I reached the top, he’d have tacked on at least an hour.

I could offer up any number of girlfriends to second what this story says: that I am bull-headedly stubborn. And that, I would argue, is a critical quality in a marathoner that my skeptical father never took into account.

him clear his head and to realize that as bad as things seemed, he had much to be happy about. His hobby just metastasized from there.

Dad and some faculty friends started a group that ran every day during lunch, and one day, in 1980, someone suggested a marathon. They opted for Johnstown, where dad, 38 at the time, posted a respectable 3:54. “To tell you how fit I was,” he explained to me one day, “I ran Johnstown, then three weeks later ran the Marine Corps in Washington, D.C. Afterward, Polly [now my stepmother] and I went to dinner, had drinks, went to a movie, then made whoopee.” In my notebook, this sentence ends in an anxiety-induced scrawl, but I can assure you those were his words. “Then I drove back to Frostburg and taught the next day.”

Things really picked up in 1985, when I was 12. Dad was awarded a Fulbright grant and we shipped off for a year in Lesotho, a tiny African nation completely surrounded by South Africa. There, he formed a new running group, and each day they would bound around the hilly, arid capital city of Maseru, sucking diesel fumes and dodging lunatic minivan taxis while carrying rocks to ward off the herds of mangy dogs. “That first year, I ran seven marathons,” Dad told me. “We used them as training runs.” Training runs for what? Ultramarathons, of course.

South Africans might not have invented this masochistic ritual, but they elevated it to national sport. Dad and his friends ran Two Oceans (34.7 miles), Bergville (32 miles), the Frasers 64 (as in 64-K, or 40 miles), and the most famous ultra of them all:

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*I am still moving along, and the 20-miler on the trail last Saturday a.m. went well. Fred Surgent, who is running his first marathon at age 63, will do the Marine Corps the week before NYC. He ran 13.6 with me before stopping, his longest run ever. But Fred is a super athlete, so he will do OK in his marathon. He has an Achilles injury, so he cannot train too hard. Work calls. Love, Dad.*



I procrastinated as long as I could, but the running finally picked up in August. I could justify some missed days; I heard once that a decent athlete could train for a marathon in three months, so I kept that figure in mind. It's not easy to squeeze an eight- or 10-miler into a workday, and so I found myself rising earlier or opting to head home for a run in the evenings in lieu of going for drinks. (I'd go for drinks *afterward*.)

With some unscheduled regularity, I'd e-mailed dad with one complaint or another—too busy, traveling too much, or, most commonly of all, so-and-so body part hurts. At one point or another, virtually every part of my lower body was sore—knees, hips, quads. One day my Achilles felt like it might snap. Even my chest felt achy; for no apparent reason it had an annoying habit of cramping up. My dad explained that this soreness was partly a function of my body type—I have broad shoulders and a bit of musculature; he has what I think we could both agree is a bird chest. He also told me to take Aleve, “because it lasts 12 hours.”

For all the nagging pains, I finally cracked double-digits on September 11, and it was then that I actually began to feel committed. I experienced some discomfort in both knees and in my lower back, but I was otherwise fine. It was the first time in two very lackadaisical months that I thought this whole marathon thing wasn't going to be so bad. The confidence boost, unfortunately, did not last long. October 4 was one of the worst days yet. I hated life for six miles over an hour, even walking twice for a minute, the first time I'd ever done that on a run. My shins hurt, my shoulder ached, and my mind wouldn't shut up with the question, *Why the hell are we doing this again?*

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*Plan to be very, very sore 24 to 48 hours after we do a long run. Too late to back out now, so whatever happens, happens. Love, Dad.*

When I arrived home in Frostburg to do our one long run together, I remembered how impossibly small the town can seem, especially for someone who has lived in Manhattan for a dozen years. Dad and Polly still rarely lock the door to their house. You could easily run from one end of town to the other, and dad often does. At breakfast on the morning of our 18-miler, which

would be my one distance test before the marathon, I sipped coffee from a 1995 Great Allegany Run mug as Polly produced a plastic bag full of the medals that hadn't been tossed out during an impromptu purge a few years back. I counted 34, plus assorted plaques and his three first-place trophies, all from recent years.

I asked Polly if she could remember that first marathon, way back in 1980. It was early in their courtship, so she has only known him as a running fanatic. She smiled.

“He said, ‘I’ve done it; that’s it. I don’t need to do another one.’”

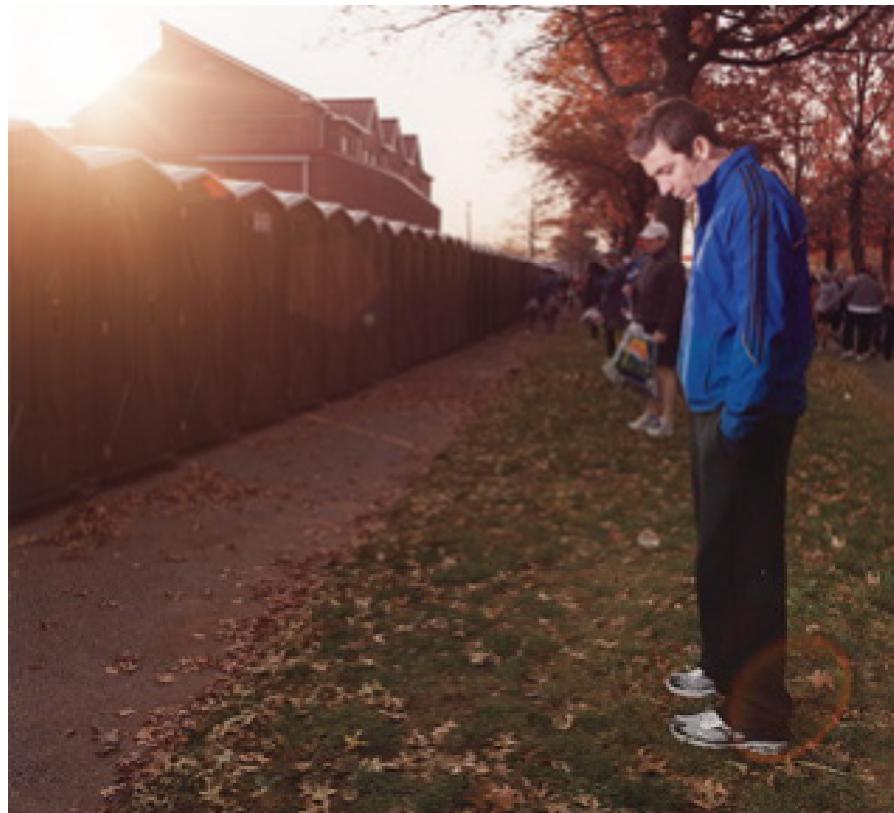
*Funny, I thought. He wasn't much older than I am now (33) when he said that. And it's exactly what I'd been saying about this coming race. I'm fairly certain that I actually mean it, but what if I don't?*

“I never ran over four hours until Boston,” Dad said, when we took up the subject of expectations over coffee. It was the 1996 Boston Marathon. He had a rough day, and knowing that a good time just wasn't in the cards, he stopped along the route to chat with Polly and her cousins and ended up running a 4:09. “Now if I ever get under four again at Boston, I'll be happy,” he said.

But while he claims to be lowering his expectations, he seems as passionate and competitive as ever. Just a few years ago, at age 60, he ran a 3:49 at TK RACE. “I was so pumped after that race because I'd broken 3:50.” The same year, he came in first in his age group at the Harrisburg Marathon and fourth at the Northern Central Trail Marathon, a race held outside Baltimore.

#### RISKY BUSINESS

After fueling up (above), the author makes one last pit stop, and gathers his thoughts for what lies ahead.





#### NO TURNING BACK NOW

Prior to he start, David runs through his veteran routine. Josh had no routine.

“It’s sorta sad, I know, to be in my 60s and excited about a stupid little wooden trophy”—a stupid little wooden trophy, it should be noted, cut in the shape of a locomotive and that sits in a prominent spot in the kitchen. He claimed it at Johnstown last fall, when he won his age group. “Polly and your sister laugh at me; they ask, ‘How many people were in my age group? One?’ But I’ve never won anything in my life. I was never an athlete like you or your brother. I was always the kid who sat on the bench and got in when my team was up 100 points. I didn’t run cross-country because it wasn’t cool. I wish I would have.”

Even now, 30 years after he started, dad has trouble explaining why he runs. I always assumed he loved it, but before we set out on the 18-miler, when I was harrumphing around his house, he settled me with a stare. “You think I’m looking forward to this any more than you are?”

*Of course you are, I thought to myself. You are a Runner! I mean, all these years, you just keep doing it. For me, it’s become an obligation. I never look forward to it. You must!*

“I have to,” he explained. “It’s like a job. I feel bad if I don’t.”

That part I can sort of understand, but what he said next made the most sense of all: “People ask, ‘Why do you run?’ I love to eat and I love to drink. I have a gargantuan appetite and I love to drink beer.” And that’s probably as close as I came to the truth.

I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like for my dad when he has to give it up. He’s already outlasted several generations of running buddies. “I’m the last one still going. My running group at noon has all quit. My South African running friends have all quit,” he told me, lamenting more than a little. He now runs with some younger faculty at lunch, but no one runs consistently, and never the distances he and his friends used to run in their 40s

and 50s. Most of his old pals have injuries, but so far he’s escaped anything permanent. At Christmas in 1994, he “destroyed his back” pulling my nephew’s sled up the hill. When the first doctor told him, “If we operate, you’ll never run again,” Polly grabbed his arm and they walked out the front door in search of a second opinion. “She could never have lived with me if I had to give it up,” he said, and he’s right. A doctor at Johns Hopkins operated, and two months to the day later, he was back on the roads.

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*How goes the running? You might think about doing one more (no later than Sunday) 10-miler. I suggest NO running after next Wed. (and if you run on Wed., no more than 2-3 miles). I usually take 4 full days off before a marathon and will do so again this time. We will leave Frostburg promptly at 11 a.m. next Friday so should be in the city between 5 and 6. What about the 4 of us going out to dinner (nothing real spicy etc) on Friday eve? As much as I would love to eat at that Indian place on Fri I think we should give it a miss. Love, Dad.*

When dad and Polly arrived at my apartment two nights before the marathon, I offered him a beer and asked how he was doing. “Okay,” he said, and gave an unconvincing shrug.

Polly rolled her eyes. “Tell him, David.”

He’d hurt himself, and it wasn’t just the hamstring. A part of his lower back, known as the sacroiliac joint, had ruptured, most likely from something as benign as a misstep off a curb. As recently as Monday, Polly said, he could barely walk. With five days of physical therapy and electrical stimulation from a trainer, plus ice and heat and Aleve, his pain was better, but not gone. Basically, he said, it bothered him with every step.

I offered him a last out, knowing full well that he’d never take it. Later, we nibbled at cheese and had a beer. I suggested that we wear matching shirts so that people could find us. I expected to have friends on the route, and if we ran on a specific side of the road, we’d be easier to spot if we color-coordinated.

This was not good. The routine must not be disrupted. This was a disruption of the routine!

“I already know what I’m wearing,” he told me. He began to rustle through his suitcase, taking out water bottles and ammo belts and packets of gel. He pulled out a white, wicking, poly-blend shirt. “I’m wearing this.” After some discussion, he agreed to consider an alternate shirt, provided we could find one that was of a similar fabric and that it could be washed in time. (Another lesson: New running shirts must be washed before use.)

There was one last item still to be settled. Last year, dad caught the very first bus to the starting line. He read in the program that buses begin departing from Battery Park at 5:30 and he was out the door by 5:15. (I know this because I was asleep on the couch and he woke me up.) I told him the last bus leaves at 7:30; we could catch that one. What’s the use in sitting at the start for three hours when we can be sleeping? Again, this troubled him. The routine must not be disrupted! He flipped through the program and pointed out a line marked in bold. The last bus, in fact, was leaving at 6:30.

As laid-back as I was about the whole race thing, Dad was the complete opposite. It mirrored our training correspondence, this Laurel and Hardy routine that carried on in my living room.

"We'll leave at 6," I said, compromising.

"From the lobby at 6!" he countered.

"If you're lucky, we'll make it 5:50."

That night we ate Indian and parted ways, Dad and Polly to my apartment, me to stay at my girlfriend's. "Sleep well tonight," he said. "Tomorrow it doesn't matter if you get two hours, but tonight you need sleep. Take a night off from carousing."

The following night, the one before the marathon day, we watched some football, only half paying attention, as he set aside his clothes, packed a little bag, and mixed up several bottles of electrolyte drinks. Then he pulled apart his running shoes and told me to take out my insoles to look for pebbles and dirt that might bother me during the race. It was just another part of the routine.

"Okay, last advice," he said. "Put everything together tonight." He started to go to bed then turned around. "I know you said you have some, but I brought you Band-Aids." He set them down on the counter and went to bed.

On race morning, Dad didn't say much. He was up before dawn, making coffee and further organizing the things he had already organized the night before. While he was in the bathroom, Polly gave me a look. "He's hurting more than he lets on," she said. "I've never seen him so quiet before a race."

We ate some oatmeal and were in the elevator at 5:55. Outside, the day wasn't even breaking; no one was on the streets. I told him I hadn't really slept, that after tossing and turning for a few

hours, I finally dozed off at about 3 and was up when he started rustling around, sometime around 5.

"So you do get nervous," he said. "Mr. Laid-Back is worried?"

Of course I was nervous. I was now fully committed to a ridiculous endeavor that only 12 months prior I would have not even considered a possibility. In a little less than an hour, I would be somewhere in Staten Island a good 26 miles—and many painful hours—from the finish.

At the start, it was chilly while we waited with the other runners. A couple of times we eschewed long porta-potty lines to rid ourselves in the bushes of the free coffee and Gatorade. I was happy to sit on dewy grass and attempt not to count down the minutes until the torture began. For my dad, sitting still just isn't part of the premarathon program. *Had I noticed the free donuts? Did I want a banana? Don't drink too much of the free coffee.* It was nervous chatter, punctuated by smalltalk, and then before I knew it, we were lining up to head for the starting line.

What I remember about the actual race is that it was fun, for awhile. Throughout Brooklyn, there were big crowds and bigger smiles. I high-fived kids and hugged some friends. Dad and I chatted and picked our way through the clots of runners. If he was hurting, he wasn't letting on.

But as we left Queens and moved into Manhattan, the run went downhill fast. For me, every step after 18 miles was uncharted territory. Entering the Bronx at mile 20 was the longest of my life. Every inch of my legs felt like it was being pounded with a meat tenderizer. About that time, when it was seeming impossible, this idea of finishing, Dad sensed me flagging before even I did. "Just break it up into smaller increments—one mile at a time."

We ran mostly in silence, him speaking only to tell me when to suck down a GU packet with some water. As the race dragged on, he got grumpier, a clear sign that the hamstring was bothering him. He barked at an overly cheery pace runner, and I had to reprimand him on our return to Manhattan, when he grumbled—loudly—about the crowd encroaching into the road, upsetting our rhythm.

Slowly, and almost unnoticeably (to me, at the time) our roles began to shift. He wasn't complaining, but I could tell he was hurting, in part because his pigeon-toed gait slowed more than normal. And I, for reasons that remain unclear, emerged from the fog and felt revitalized.

Something weird was happening. On Fifth Avenue, around mile 23, I started to run faster. After watching runners pass us for miles, we began to gain ground. I felt like I had a kick, but more than that, I could sense the finish. In the park, I kicked even harder, but looked back to see Dad wasn't following. I lagged back, making a cocky "let's go" gesture with my arms.

"Don't run away from me this last mile," he said.

"I won't," I answered. "We're in this together."

We turned the corner at Columbus Circle—with less than a half mile to go—and it was finally clear to me that we were going to survive, that my knees weren't going to explode and he wasn't going to collapse in paralysis. For that last mile, I don't remember any pain. I felt elated. I be- (continued on page 122)

#### TIES THAT BIND

After conquering the marathon—and sharing a beer—father and son celebrate their epic day.



## THE PROFESSOR AND MR. LAID-BACK

*Continued from page 96*

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gan to choke up, and my arms felt a little tingly. I was going to finish a marathon, and my dad wouldn't be dragging me along by the scruff of my neck. If anything, I was pulling him along. Just before the line, he reached for my hand, to raise it as if I were his vice president, but instead I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and that's how we crossed, in a semiembrace.

I looked back at our time. 4:40. Subtracting the nine minutes it took us to get to the starting line, that's a 4:31, or almost exactly my prediction. "If you hadn't had to pull me," he said, "you might have shaved 10 minutes off of that."

On Central Park West, we met up with Polly and some friends. My girlfriend handed me a Coors Light and Dad and I passed it back and forth until it was gone. "So you did it," he said. Yeah, I guess I did.

Two days later, I got one last e-mail from Dad, in response to one I'd sent him congratulating us on actually enduring this torture; the note I got back made the whole thing even more worth it.

*I will always treasure the day. Out of 70 marathons and ultramarathons, there are two at the top and you were present at both—the 1986 Comrades and last Sunday. Although you and Polly missed my 9:15 finish at Comrades, I will always remember the stunned look you both had when you found me sitting in the hotel lobby, smiling and waiting for you. But I think Sunday even tops that, and I especially will always remember how it was you who pulled me over the final mile.*

By the end of his note, though, he was back to business:

*How sore are you today? I am actually a bit more than yesterday—the old 48-hour rule. But by tomorrow I will probably try and do a gentle 2 miles. Love, Dad.*

I suppose I can cross the marathon off the list now. I said going in that this would be my one and only, and I still think that's the case. But the funny thing is, it's months later and I just got in from a run. I'm not running far or with the same sort of regularity, but I am running, and I don't, you know, really have a reason. 