

Leaving Las Vegas

You Need a GPS to Run Around Sin City.

BY RACHEL TOOR

I used to think it was cheating. Then, as is often the case with the things we are morally opposed to, when I was on the receiving end, I changed my mind.

A handful of years ago, for the first and perhaps only time, I trained hard for a marathon. There was a relay option for this race, so my friends Scott and Ralph teamed up—to get in an easy training run—and so that each could accompany me for half. Scott, our friend Stephen (who had also recently gotten serious about marathon training), and I breezed through the first half. Then, as expected, when the mile markers reached the 20s, it got hard. Ralph kept up not only a steady tempo but a patter of encouragement, support, and good stories. He helped me to my fastest-ever 26.2-miler and demonstrated the benefits of having a “pacer.”

Five years down the road, in 2006, I had become a semiprofessional pacer myself, having joined the Clif Bar marathon pace team assigned to lead the 4:00 group. The year ended in December, in Las Vegas.

LES JEUX SONT FAIT

After the marathon, I prowled the casino and peeked over the shoulders of players, watching the dealers make graceful gestures with their hands, thinking to myself of Sartre and James Bond: *les jeux sont fait*. I stopped for a moment by a table with two 40-something white guys, a black guy, and a much older, harshly blond woman. One of the guys looked at me, gestured to the empty chair beside him.

“Have a seat.”

Other men had asked me to sit down, and now, as before, I demurred.

“No,” he said. “Sit.”

I demurred. I just wanted to watch.

“Here,” he said, digging into his pocket, pulling out a wad of bills, and offering it to me. “Forty dollars. Play.”

I must have looked as shocked as I felt.

“I’m not trying to hit on you,” he said. “It’s just what I do.” “It’s what he does,” said the other guy. “You might as well sit down.”

We went back and forth for a while. I had two hours before I had to leave for the airport and had extended my late checkout to the max. I had just run a

marathon and was tired. Sitting seemed appealing. But I didn't know how to play and could barely add without recourse to my fingers.

The guy put a stack of chips in front of my chair and said he would help me.

RECALL CAN BE LUCRATIVE

Once before, I had played blackjack. In Reno. I was there—more than 15 years ago—for the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians. I was an editor at Oxford University Press and I was hanging out with my friend and author, Lou Masur. Lou is a historian who wrote a good book for Oxford on the history of public executions. He was also, as I learned in Reno, a good blackjack player. So good, in fact, he had been asked to leave casinos. Having excellent recall is a boon to a historian; for a card player, it can be lucrative.

Lou taught me the basics of the game. What I came to understand was that chips become currency mostly of duration; their meaning and value is in the ability to prolong play. I remembered loving the way I had learned to scrape the table with the edge of my card, remembered a couple of terms of art like “push,” “stand,” and “bust.”

In Vegas, at the Mandalay Bay, it was 15 bucks a hand. My new friend Joe had given me a stack of \$5 chips. I wanted to bet only one, but he explained that wasn't cricket. Had to be three. Right. I was already having problems with the math. I won the first hand and found out that he and Jay, the other guy, were friends from high school. Jay still lived in Indiana, but Joe had moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Each hand I showed to Joe and got in trouble—good-natured trouble—from a motherly dealer named Christine. I used two paws to handle my cards. I didn't stack my chips properly. I fondled my chips once I had bet them: all infractions. “Christine has been good to us,” Joe said. He showed me how to tip her, by placing a chip off the mark.

Not long after I sat down, a 20-something guy came to the table. Joe and Jay greeted him warmly and introduced us, and then warned me not to ask Zach about the marathon. I asked Zach about the marathon.

It had originally been Zach's idea for them to run Vegas. He had suggested it to Joe, who had two Chicagos under his belt. But before the race, through some combination of being **sexiled** /*QQ: is this cq? XQQ/* during a bachelor party, sleeping on the floor, and having done a long run—he herniated four discs in his back. So Joe and Jay ran the half-marathon, and Zach slept in.

I asked young Zach what he did, and he said he worked as a junior executive for Bentonville, Arkansas's, biggest employer. I asked if he had seen the movie about Wal-Mart. “Yes,” he said. “Lots of valid criticisms, but it's still a

great employer.” He told me to ask Joe what he did for work. I did. Joe danced around—something about being retired (at age 44) until I pressed to discover that he had started a company that had invented some products that had, he said, done well. I looked over at his chips. And then I looked again.

“Is that a \$1,000 chip?”

I’m not known for reserve or tact. I asked. He just shrugged.

I kept playing. When I had doubled Joe’s money, I tried to give it back to him.

“It’s not my money; it’s yours.”

Inevitably, I played it out—was up, was down, was up, and then lost it all. That was it. I was done. Then Joe broke his \$1,000 chip and gave me a stack of blue ones. These were “quarters.”

Joe kept urging me to bet big—to lay it all on the line. But I had spent the early hours of the morning gambling, and it had worn me down.

SHARON: PACER, JOURNALIST, SLOT SLUT

This was the “New” Las Vegas Marathon, taken over by the Devine Racing Company, whose marathons I had done in Los Angeles (fine), and Salt Lake City (a little shakier). At each, I had paced at a comfortable four hours—my mandate was to come in between 3:58:01 and 3:59:59, and each time I did.

I had been looking forward to Vegas because I had never been there, because it was a direct flight from my new home in Spokane, and because it was to be the last in an autumn with more marathons than I wanted to do—the fifth for me in a couple of months. It was supposed to be six. I had been invited to go do Singapore as a journalist; the race fell two weeks after my pacing duties at Philly and the weekend before Vegas. I wanted to go—Singapore, I’m guessing, is both one of the most and least interesting countries in Asia—but realized that flying 30 hours each way to spend a day and a half in an interesting/weird place was probably not a prudent use of my time and energy. It was only five marathons, but it coincided with my first quarter of teaching in a graduate writing program. Working with students can be exhausting. I was tired.

After our team premarathon dinner, but before we retired to our room, my roommate, Sharon, and I did some reconnaissance; we wanted to know where we could get coffee in the morning. Sharon took the opportunity to slide a few more dollars in the slot machines. I had no idea that this sensible, competent woman—with whom I had roomed a bunch of times over the year and who could always be counted on to have anything I had forgotten or didn’t even know I needed—was an inveterate and incorrigible slot slut. She rationalized that she had spent less in the slot machines than the retail price of the trip—room, airfare, food, and marathon entry—to Vegas.

But, I felt compelled to point out, she didn't have to pay for any of that. Yeah, but—she said.

Who am I to mess with someone's rationalizations? I didn't get it—I would rather spend my money shopping for shoes or buying expensive chocolates—but I loved this incongruous facet of her sturdy character.

We discovered that you could bet on the marathon. The casino listed the top five in the men's and women's fields, and you could pick among them, or you could bet on sex. They gave the first woman 17 minutes over the first man. I wasn't entirely sure how this worked, but then, much about gambling eluded me. I wrestled Sharon away from the slots, and we went back up to our lavish room, with its lavish tub built for two. It was wasted on us.

THE STRIP IN THE DARK

The race was supposed to start at 6:00 A.M. It didn't. There were fireworks to be ignited, the Blue Man Group to be seen (though I was too short to see anything), and the elite women to be sent off. We started sometime well after six. It was still dark, but the Strip was illuminated and bewitching. I loved the anywhere-but-here quality to Vegas—Paris, New York, Egypt, anywhere but the American desert.

Philadelphia boasts one of the fastest median finishing times of any marathon in the country: More people under four hours; more people qualifying for Boston. My experience bore this out. In the City of Brotherly Love, I had the biggest group ever finish with me. Too many times I've crossed the line—in 3:59—alone, and then hung around to cheer in those many overoptimistic or undertrained souls who had run part way with me and then fallen off the pace. I anticipated another lonely finish at Vegas. It didn't seem like the kind of place to draw a serious crowd of runners.

It was, however, a draw for lovers. At mile five, there was a wedding chapel you could run into and get married—or renew your vows. As usual, at the start I drew my group around me. As usual, they were skeptical that I was in fact an official pacer. I was dressed like a bag lady in the thrift store sweats and heavy coat I buy before every race and then pitch just before the start, stripping down to my Clif pacer singlet and shorts. I gave my usual pep talk.

I told them that I take it personally if they do not finish with me; it hurts my feelings. I expected them to be with me through the half but wanted them to be with me at the end. It makes me feel good to help others achieve their goals; that's why I do this. Please remember, I implored: this is not about you—it's all about me. Then I asked if anyone wanted to marry me at mile five. Not one person took me up on it. Well, one guy did, but he was only running the half and I told him that DQ'd him. Only marathoners were eligible.

They had four and a half miles to think about it.

Right there at the start, two guys caught my eye, both handsome and fit. Chris was from Southern California, a tall Latino, talkative and fired up. Eric wore a Twin Cities Marathon singlet and said he had been in Vegas for the past five days, wining and dining neurosurgeons on the tab of the medical device company he worked for.

The gun went off, and so did we, down the Strip. I had been told that the first mile was just past the Monte Carlo, but the Monte Carlo came and went without a trace of a mile marker. I didn't see a mile marker for the first four miles, even though there were clocks on the course. Laura from Tulsa had a GPS watch and said we were going too fast.

There was a tailwind; I told her not to worry.

I've paced the 4:00 group enough to have a good sense of how it's supposed to feel. I lock into the pace after a couple of miles and hit it consistently. I wasn't concerned.

Chris and I chattered away the miles, with Eric occasionally chiming in. It felt like being at home. I'm accustomed to spending my Sunday morning in the company of smart, 30-something men; that's how I've done my long runs the past dozen years. Eric had been a biology major hockey player at Notre Dame, who had tried out bench science for a while after graduation and then went to work for industry. When he started running, he lost his hockey bulk. Chris turned out to be the commander of a unit of 160 airmen at Vandenberg Air Force Base. He was working on a second master's degree and told us his friends said he looked like an anorexic Vin Diesel.

No, I said, Vin Diesel looks like a fat you.

Chris said, "You probably think we won't agree on a lot of things, but I bet you're wrong." I told him that I thought he was wrong and that it was dangerous to make such assumptions. One of my favorite running partners is a career Navy guy, a captain whose underpants are now under glass at the Navy Museum in Washington, DC.

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

Ted Triebel, known as "Hawk" to his fighter pilot buddies, was shot down in Vietnam wearing his last pair of clean boxers—those his wife had sent him for Valentine's Day. Each day, Ted, in solitary confinement, washed out his shorts, red hearts and all, and hung them high on the line letting the other pilots could see them and know he was still alive. Over the many years I lived in North Carolina, Ted and I covered many hundreds of miles talking about books and movies, that problematic war, and the military situation over the last decade. He taught me a lot.

Ted also moderated minor skirmishes and squabbles among those in our group. Ted tempered us, reminded us of what was important. It's easy to be committed to your own point of view; rallying others, getting people to come together and see commonalities, is a special art. I learned about leadership from Ted.

Last summer I went to the museum that the Hanoi Hilton has become. I saw Ted's cell, wandered the tiny courtyard where the downed pilots had been allowed to exercise, and read propaganda about how well the captured Americans had been treated. I lit a candle in front of the Buddha and cried. Ted had only portions of his lungs working and yet he still ran. In his gentle way, he had talked about what it was like to have Jane Fonda there in Vietnam, ranting, angry; about what it was like to come home from that terrible war. I cried thinking about Ted and realizing that there are days that go by when I don't once think of all the young men and women who are overseas right now, fighting and too often dying.

Because of Ted, I recognized Chris as the kind of man who understands honor, duty, and country in ways that are deeper than semantics and who I knew could be counted on to protect those he felt responsible for, whether his own men or the people of his country. It wasn't rhetoric to him; it was real. I admired and respected him more than I could ever tell him during a four-hour marathon.

I asked if he had read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, perhaps the most heartbreaking book ever written about any war. He quoted lines from it and I got chills. He was going to Iraq in April, he told me. I think I gasped. He would be carrying on his broad shoulders, in his big heart, the burdens of this complicated war. We talked about Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Aristotle. We talked about women in the military, gays, and affirmative action. "I hate it," he said. "I don't want anyone to think I needed any help in getting to where I am. I pulled myself up. Others can do it too."

He had started a reading group among his soldiers.

"We're reading Friedman," he said.

"Milton?" I asked.

"No, no," he said. "Thomas L. These guys don't know what's going on in the world, and they need to understand."

The conversation ambled to geography, and he said he lived near where the movie *Sideways* had been filmed. Chris, Eric, and I all agreed that it was a good, though not great, movie.

"But," I said, "it has one of my favorite scenes of any recent movie. That scene alone makes the whole movie worth watching over and over."

"Which scene?" Chris asked.

"Guess," I challenged. It's a challenge I've issued before, an unfair litmus test for simpaticoness.

"The one where he starts talking about pinot?"

Of course.

It's a wrenching scene—two crafted monologues. Hapless Miles explaining why he feels so strongly about pinot noir, why he appreciates it for its difficulty, its complexity. And Maya responding to him with her own poignant take on why she loves wine. These two people, passionate about the same thing, for personal and beautiful reasons, so connected in this moment, so poised for greater connection—and then missing, going sideways.

“It's about the difficulty of being a writer, right?” Chris asked, like a good student.

GAMBLING ON THE RUN

Terry was trying to qualify for Boston—she had just turned 45, and someone behind us said she had a nice ass. Every so often someone would say something about Terry's nice ass. I could feel her smiling. A guy named Danny periodically sang out cadence—always about me. *Rachel's looking for a hubby. It's OK if he's a tubby. Sound off. One two. Sound off. Three four.* Eric said that he had a meeting at 10:45 A.M. and that one of the surgeons said that if he made it, he would take him up in his MIG. I wanted to know if I could come.

We ran against a backdrop of big mountains, into an angry head wind and under a darkening sky. It might have gone down as my favorite pacing experience ever, except for the fact that the mile markers and giant digital clocks were not marking the miles. We were doing 5:30s, and then 8:26s, and then 13:00 miles. I kept telling my worried group not to worry, that I would get them in under four hours. But I wasn't so sure. At 20, I looked at my watch and realized that if I could trust the last marker, I was going to finish eight minutes fast. That is not acceptable. Not for me. I sent Chris and Eric and Terry and a few others—all of whom were looking strong—ahead and tried to slow down. It was beginning to feel harder than it should have. The tension of worry had been consuming my energy.

Then Scott, a fellow pacer who usually takes the 3:30 group but had tweaked a hamstring at Philly, met up with me. He was assigned to float—starting out with the 3:20 group and then moving back a group every few miles. I told him I was worried I was way off, and that I thought the miles were messed up.

“The miles are way off,” he assured me. I let him hold my balloons for a while and tried to relax.

We carry wooden dowels with balloons tied to them. This is the thing that people find most impressive about our pacing: that we carry these darned balloons for 26.2 miles, even on days like this, with winds of 20 to 30 miles per hour. (They also find it hard to believe there's not a better way to do this—if you can think of one that doesn't involve bonking other runners on the head or getting tangled up, let me know.) Usually I love holding my balloons, trumpeting my role in the race, and am reluctant to give them up at the end. But now I wanted to pitch them.

While I had been chatting with the good people in my group, I had managed not to focus on the timing issues, figuring that it would work out. But now I was panicking. It was like running blind. I couldn't trust any of the mile markers. Scott had figured out that the correct miles were in orange paint on the side of the road, and we saw one of these at 22—and then not another until 26. We had no idea how fast or slow we were, and we still had a bunch of people counting on us.

I used to get more nervous pacing a marathon than trying to go for a PR; I figured that there was more at stake. I knew that if I blew up in my own race, that it would matter only to me—and, well, to those who love me and have to put up with me afterward. The responsibility of having other people rely on me to come within two minutes over four hours always used to keep me from sleeping and give me a stomachache before the race. Each time it seemed like a miracle that I made it. But after doing it enough times, it became for me like another day at the office. It was a job I knew how to do, and like all jobs had parts that I enjoyed and those others that are not as much fun.

Now I was a wreck. I was permitted to come in two minutes fast, but not faster than that, and not one second over. When we got to mile 26, I was about four minutes fast. So Scott and I lollygagged and cheered runners in, stretching out that last quarter to get to the line in the correct time. Then we discovered there was no food at the finish. It was not a good way to start the morning.

THE WORST EVER

At lunch, six of us pacers—with a total of over 350 marathons under our collective (small) belts—agreed that this was the worst marathon we had ever run. How hard is it to get the mile markers in the right place? Runners paid a hundred bucks—plus shelled out plenty more for travel and lodging and slot machines. Shouldn't they be able to count on knowing where they were on the course? How could we be expected to do our jobs with nothing to go on? How could race management feel good about putting its name on the T-shirt as if it was something to be proud of?

I would never want to be a race director. I do not have the requisite attention to detail that makes doing a good job possible. I know how hard it is to manage a large event; I can barely manage getting food for myself a few times a day. At races I try always to thank volunteers, and police officers, and spectators for helping us in our endeavors. I try to be understanding, know that things can get screwed up. But this race pissed me off.

Then I had a bath, a two-hour bitch sessions with my colleagues at lunch, a couple of venting phone calls to friends, and went prowling the hotel casino, where I met Joe and Jay and Zack.

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

“You can’t take it with you,” Joe said. He had asked if I thought he was going to win the next hand and when I said yes, put down a \$500 chip. He lost it. And I sunk my head into my hands.

“You can’t take it with you, right?” he said, looking dead at me, then clarified that he didn’t mean I wasn’t welcome to get up and go with the \$350 of stacked “quarters” I couldn’t seem to keep my hands off. As a writer, I bridle at clichés, but I stopped to think about this for a moment. Joe was trying to tell me something. It seemed urgent.

Still, I couldn’t bring myself to bet more than \$25 at a time. I had been hot for a while, and then my pile dwindled. I was down to \$150 just before I had to leave for the airport.

“Bet it all,” Joe said. “Or cash it out. Those are your choices.”

I couldn’t walk out with his money—with real money.

“I got some really smart guys to work with me,” Joe said. “We made a good product and then we sold it. Then we made some other products, and we sold them.” He looked at me and shrugged: “Pay it forward.”

I’m not a gambler. Three times in my life I’ve left jobs—good jobs—with nothing lined up because I trust myself. I believe in my abilities to make things work out. I believe in my talents and skills and rarely underestimate my many faults. Running the Las Vegas Marathon without reliable mile markers was, for me, a gamble. I don’t like the discomfort of uncertainty, but I’ve learned how to live with it in other parts of my life. A marathon, however, is not a war. And it’s not work. It’s what we do for fun.

Joe shrugged again, took another swig of Seven and Seven. “It’s up to you,” he said.

I bet it all.

Lost it all.

I walked away with nothing.

But it didn’t feel like nothing.

