

Living Nightmares and Realizing Dreams

The stars were aligning just in time for my Goofy's Race and a Half Challenge in Orlando, FL. I packed my bags with one goal in mind: to run a qualifying time for guaranteed entry into the 2010 New York City Marathon on Nov. 7. I've been disappointed in previous attempts finishing just seconds shy, but this time I felt that it was destiny. For one, Disney World is the place where all your dreams come true. I wanted to test the reality of that dream, so a week before the race I ran 9 miles at the pace I needed to earn a qualifying time. I felt good and my confidence level rose at each mile split. I jogged off some of the soreness on Tuesday and followed that with a massage on Wednesday, which left me feeling loose and relaxed – thanks Cindy! At lunch Thursday, I heard them play Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York". Morgan and I flew out on a Southwest flight to Orlando on Friday morning, which continued to New York, clearly a sign that my path to NYC goes through Orlando; the race against the clock was ON!

Morgan did a fantabulous job setting up travel arrangements with the help of her sister's friends. Thank you Emily for picking us up at the Airport and driving us to the Expo and then to Samantha and Jake's apartment! We ate a late lunch at a Chic-fil-a. I wanted to get my sugar fix in with their sweet lemonade. A group of students were in the store raising money for their trip to a robotics competition. Being the dork that I am I asked them questions about what all they had to do in the competition, the programming and controls, yada-yada-yada. They were enthusiastic, so I donated \$10. I thought that with every donation you got a chance to spin the wheel to win a coupon for a free menu item. It turned out, that with every dollar donation you get a spin. Well, you can't find that good of a return on an investment in this economy, so Morgan, Emily and I took turns spinning the wheel. We won multiple coupons for drinks, fries and dessert. With our bellies full and pockets stuffed with coupons we headed on our way to the apartment. Thank you Samantha and Jake for letting us crash at your apartment and giving us the key to your car (with butt warmers!) for the weekend. It definitely made the weekend events a lot more enjoyable and we got to play with their two kitties, Yoda and Milano.

I was trying to erase all doubt leading up to the Half Marathon, but the weather was on a different course. Apparently, the 2009 Boston has cursed me with bad weather, because there has been a black cloud hovering over me from New Jersey to California and back to the East Coast in Orlando. Morgan and I ventured out Friday evening to Downtown Disney for some shopping, food and fun. Who'd've ever thought that it would snow the night before a race in Orlando, FL of all places? I sure didn't expect that. We headed back around 11pm after exploring some of the rides and games at Disney Quest.

Arriving at the apartment, Morgan commented that she started to feel a bit more confident in her navigating skills. She made a few attempts to unlock the door, but it wouldn't open. Samantha had explained that the lock can be tricky at times so I was going to give it a try next. At this point Morgan asked, "This is their apartment, right?" Joe, "Yeah number 202." Morgan, "And see there's the tennis cou-oh, that's... a... pond." Then the door opened and a woman's cold, faceless expression appeared in the crack. We were beside ourselves as she had the look of "death to you" on her face. We were so embarrassed and proclaimed profound apologies as we scampered away. But those cries of apologies turned into tears of joy as we broke out into uncontrollable laughter running down the stairs into the car. We must have been laughing for 10 minutes; at ourselves for being complete doofuses and at the

lady's expression. We did feel bad though because she was probably frightened that a couple of strangers were trying to get in her door. But honestly, who can believe that Morgan and I can scare anybody. I think she scared us more than we did her.

When we did make it into the right apartment, reality of the race started to sink in. The freezing weather and an ungodly early start time of 5:40am EST (4:40 CST - where I am from!) were giving me nightmares. I thumbed through the race booklet to make sure our race day morning plans would work out. I wanted to leave the apartment by 4:30, but the race booklet wanted runners to drop their sweat bags off by 4:30. Huh, really? That wasn't going to happen, not in my case at least. If anything I would just leave my bag with Morgan and have her meet me after I finish. My nightmare got even scarier when I read that the start is a 20 minute walk from the bag drop. Wait, so they want us to go on this march of death before we ever get to the starting line? I didn't know what to do, so despite being past midnight I called Anthony to verify the race day logistics, because he ran the marathon a few years ago. My nightmare was real; Mickey was pointing his finger at me while laughing and mocking me, trying to dash my hopes and dreams. I called Marie, because she always has encouraging words of wisdom to share and that helped me regain focus. Then Anne suggested I bag it up in the morning, so I cut holes in a few garbage bags and for the sake of not having to think in the morning, I wrote "leg here", "arm here" and "head here" with a sharpie provided for us in the goody bag – or "goofy" bag as I call it.

After all that drama, Morgan and I eventually got to sleep, which turned out to be a 3 hour nap. On the way to Epcot that morning, traffic was being funneled from a 3 lane road to 1 lane for a ½ mile section and then back to 3 lanes again. I was really starting to get pissed off, especially when a driver was refusing to let us merge into her lane – IT'S EVERY OTHER ONE LADY! Gawrsh (as Goofy would say it). We saw a runner alongside the road trying to catch the attention of some of the cars. He was clearly trying to get to the race. I asked Morgan if she felt comfortable letting him jump into our warm car and she did, so we stopped to let him in. It turns out he was from Japan and from our broken conversation in English, we understood that he was staying in a hotel outside the park and couldn't get a taxi ride so he decided to run. Sounds like some crazy antics I would try to pull off. He was very appreciative to get a ride over the last 2 miles. Who knows how long he had been running before we picked him up.

I was in no rush to step out of the warm car with butt warmers. It was windy, freezing cold and sleeting outside; by far not the most ideal conditions in which to be racing. I wanted someone to pinch me and wake me from this nightmare, but stepping outside, Jack Frost let me know this was reality. Morgan walked with me to the bag drop. They were still taking bags so I just left her my shirt. I told her it would be best for her to go back in the car because it was miserable out here and she needs more rest for her marathon the next day. I was on a mission and would see her in a jiffy. I climbed over the gate into the 1st corral, just before the start of the first wave. I ended up starting with the 1:50 pace group. I'd've liked to start closer up front, but I managed to work my way through the crowd without expending too much energy.

Despite the arctic elements, I wore my standard racing shorts and cut sleeve shirt with gloves, skull cap and arm warmers. It was enough to fight off the freeze, but I was still cold. The wind bit at my nose and ears and the steady fall of sleet stung as it pelted my face and eyes. I told myself that the faster I run,

the faster I get out of this so called “happiest place on earth”, so I kept dropping my pace. I was running on adrenaline because 1) I was pissed off at the world (no matter how small or big), 2) I wanted New York so, so bad and 3) I kept passing runners. In fact, I caught up to our Japanese hitch hiker friend around mile 5. I was surprised to see him running so strong after this morning’s adventure. I gave him one of my hammer gels and wished him luck.

I paid little attention to my surroundings as I ran through the park. My focus was to finish under 1:23. There was a 3 or so mile stretch coming away from the Magic Kingdom that had a dead wind. I could finally start to feel my fingers and nose. This stretch was pitch black, and the oncoming traffic blinded me with their headlights. It was around mile 7 where I almost hit the tarmac for the first time. There was a speed bump or some kind of raised obstruction on the road that I grazed over with my right foot. I don’t think anyone was around to witness it, as the crowd had thinned out and there were absolutely no spectators or volunteers around for a mile. I almost ate it for a second time at an S curve around mile 9. I expected the path to be slick so I tried to run as straight of a line as possible. My left foot lost a little traction but I was able to quickly regain my balance.

I approached a group of 5 male runners at mile 10. I ran up behind them and feeling confident with how I felt at this stage of the race, I decided to get a bit cocky. I said, “5k to go gentlemen, this is where the race begins, this is what separates the men from the boys.” I gave them The Look and motored on. Nothing was going to come between me and my goal now as I had built about a 2:30 cushion. It was still pitch black and some of the runners were fading over the last 5k. I still felt strong and around mile 11, I caught site of the first female runner, just a quarter mile or so in front of me. I gained a lot of ground on her coming around a tight corner turn and again at a U-turn just ½ mile from the finish. I was about 50 meters behind her when she broke the tape. They had quite the celebration with lights flashing, confetti blowing, lots of noise and cameras. I got to follow her in and run through it all. I thought I was in a dream. The finish was more than I could ever have imagined. I beat my fists on my chest (like King Kong as he terrorized New York) and let out a yell crossing the line with a new PR and a long-awaited qualifying time for New York.

I wore my Donald Duck medal with pride and proceeded through the Goofy Challenge tent to receive another wrist band for the Sunday’s marathon. My body heat and energy level were fading quickly, so I decided to call Morgan to meet me at the baggage tent while I got dressed into warm dry clothes, but with little shelter from the cold, wet and windy conditions, I quickly turned into a popsicle. I had Morgan guide me through the parking lot to the car as I tucked my head into my towel. I started to slowly defrost especially when the butt warmers kicked in. We literally drove through loops to get out of the parking lot, but we eventually made it out to I-4. We stopped at Publix to purchase some breakfast items, a bag of ice and some hard cider, which put me out for the next 3 hours.

Apparently, that wasn’t all a bad dream. I woke up and listened to a voice message Anthony left for me on my cell. He said my efforts that morning landed me in 1st place in my age group, official time of 1:19:13, 18th overall. I thought to myself, “Wow, where did that come from?” Anthony also lays claim to surviving the weather as he came through in 1:48:51. The real test will come in the marathon the next day, but until then it was time to eat, drink and be merry.

The 9 of us met up at the City Walk and ate lunch at Margaritaville. We made friends with the parrots perched outside under propane patio heaters. I was flattered that a female bird, Chester actually hit on me. She butted my head when I tried squawking back at her and she grabbed my finger with her beak when she was pulled away from me. It was cozy warm inside. We ordered margaritas and I ate like a champion; some volcano nachos, mushroom quesadillas, gumbo, and a baked half chicken on a bed of rice.

We visited some stores to walk around for a little while and then split ways, so that Morgan and I could visit my Uncle Vern and Aunt Judy who drove up from Tampa. We had fun walking around Downtown Disney, chatting, shopping and snapping fun pictures. Morgan and I wanted to throw in the towel a little earlier than the night before so we capped the evening off by ordering hot chocolate from the Ghirardelli store – yummmmy! Vern and Judy wished us the best of luck in our marathons the next morning.

Anthony easily convinced me to go Goofy in 2010. We quickly got others to jump on board the ship, but just for the marathon. This was Morgan's first marathon. She and Anthony come from a strong swimming background and they both made themselves available to help me train for my Brazil IronMan in May 2008. Now it was my chance to return that favor and guide Morgan in her training for this marathon. Starting the program she never imagined being able to run 20 miles in training, but her hard work and determination proved no match for the task at hand. She improved a lot over the 20 weeks, and it showed when she earned 3rd place in her Age Group at the 2009 Sugarland Turkey Trot. A month and a half later we are toeing the line at the Disney World Marathon ready to embark on a 26.2 mile adventure through the 4 theme parks.

We left a little earlier that morning to give us more time to park and get ready. But the traffic delayed us so we hustled to drop our bags off, get to the start and once I jumped into my coral with the 3:10 pace group, BANG, the marathon got underway. Morgan was in the 3rd wave, so she had a little more time to visit the bathroom and get to the start. It was nice running with the pace group. The 7:10 min/mile pace felt like 8 as I tucked in the middle of the warm group, sheltered from the brunt of the wind. There were a few of us running Goofy, so we shared our delusional stories from Saturday morning.

It was freezing cold out there. It was almost surreal, seeing the breath from all the runners around me. It was so cold that the water vapor from our breath froze to our caps and eyelashes. It was so cold that the water molecules in the cups at the water stations were coagulating and forming ice crystals. It was so cold that the road was icing over where water had been spilled at the water stations. It was so cold that... yeah you get the idea already – IT WAS FREEZING! I say that if Orlando is hellish hot in the summer, then all Hell froze over this weekend for our race.

Our pacer was doing a great job and we were a little ahead of 3:10 pace coming up to mile 11. I felt pretty good and thought I had a legitimate chance at finishing under 3 hours, so with the wind at our back I decided to break off from the group. A few others joined me. We crossed the half at 1:32:29. I thought if we could work together, we would have a good chance to negative split and break 3 hours.

Steve dropped the pace around mile 16 and shortly thereafter another guy from our group followed suit. I let another Goofy runner lead through the Animal Kingdom to mile 20. Looking at my watch, I knew it was going to be close if I could keep up pace. I was beginning to feel yesterday's effort in my legs. I kept pounding back energy gels, hoping to keep my energy level up, but I couldn't find it in me to fight the last 5k. My work was done, I qualified for New York, I made a valiant effort to break 3, now I just wanted to bring it in and seek warmth.

Those last couple miles were extremely cold as I couldn't keep myself warm with the slower pace. I crossed the line in 3:05:30, shivering and with my teeth chattering. I aimed a finger gun to my head and shot myself. I had a couple volunteers escort me to the medical tent in a wheel chair. They rolled me to a cot and were about to lay me down, but I told them I just wanted to walk around. It was warmer in the tent because it was sheltered from the wind. They wrapped me in an oven-baked blanket and served me a warm lemon-lime Powerade which on any other day would have been disgusting (yeah, sipping a yellow, warm liquid through a straw, bleh...) but I was glad for it at the time. They gave me a dry long sleeve shirt to change into and a bag to put my wet clothes in. I thanked them and went on to receive my hardware, a Mickey medal and a Goofy medal to go with my Donald Duck medal from the half.

Emily was there at the other side of the goofy tent. I could hardly recognize her since she looked like an Eskimo all bundled up. I went over to receive a congratulatory warm hug then got my sweat bag to put on warm clothes. We then proceeded to the finish line bleachers to wait for Morgan. We stood packed in like sardines in the sun, which was good because it kept us warm. We saw quite a few runners dressed in costumes. My apprentice looked great crossing the line! She ran her first marathon in 4:37:17. I was very proud. We were able to snap a few pictures of her and fought our way through the crowd to meet up with her as she walked out of baggage claim.

It was a reunion of sorts, because we saw Anthony (4:43:40) and Brittany there at the baggage claim as well. We snapped a picture of us 3 marathon finishers, showing off our medals and forcing pleasant smiles through gritting teeth. We decided not to hang out in the cold for too long and made the trek to the car with butt warmers. Morgan and I were very excited about the butt warmers the entire trip! Morgan drove us back to the apartment. We cleaned up and ate breakfast then took to our beds. After a second hard cider I was passed out for 2 hours.

Samantha and Jake were great hosts. They let us lounge and veg for as long as we wanted. They couldn't believe what could have possibly possessed us to run a marathon. Morgan and I wanted to do something that evening, so we decided to catch a dinner and a show at Medieval Times. Good thing we did because it was awesome! We went up to the ticket counter and asked for 2 general admission tickets to that night's show. The lady asked if we had coupons. We didn't but we asked if she could look to see what she had. I then mentioned to her that we ran the marathon that morning. She was impressed and gave us each a \$26 discount.

We feasted like kings and queens. They came around with tomato bisque soup and garlic bread, followed by a baked half chicken and half potato, a single spare rib (kind of random) and apple pie for

dessert. No utensils allowed, so we looked like ravenous beasts tearing away at the food, I loved every finger-licking minute of it!

The show was just as well done as the chicken. Morgan and I sat in the first row of the Blue section. Our knight was Sir Valiant. We sat next to a family who was celebrating their son's 9th birthday. There was a family reunion behind us that was loud and proud and started chanting "Blue, Blue, Blue..." We all join in and were clearly the loudest of the 6 sections there. Our knight actually smirked and probably thought what fools we were making of ourselves, but we were having fun. Our enthusiasm earned Morgan one of the roses he threw out to the audience.

The horses were beautiful as they pranced and danced to the music. A falcon swooped around the audience. The knights dueled with swords, axes and spears. I was too tired to follow the plot of the storyline, but the action kept me awake. Morgan and I thought that the victor of the duels would be based on the section that was the loudest. But that was not the case. We were very disappointed when Sir Valiant was slain in the gut by the Knight dressed in yellow and red. At the end of the show we took pictures with the king's right hand man and Sir Valiant.

We went back to the apartment to pack a little before meeting up with Anthony and Brittany at a bar. Before this trip we hadn't hung out for months. It's funny how it takes nearly 500 miles for us to meet up and share a couple drinks. Morgan and I hit the dance floor before the end of the evening and then headed back to the apartment to catch some much needed zzzz's. We woke up early again, this time to take a tour of the Omni Resort Hotel where Morgan's sister, Courtney, used to work and where Samantha and Jake work. It was very nice, especially the presidential suite. The cabanas outside by the pool and lazy river looked too cold for that weekend. Jake drove us to the airport and we flew back home having accomplished the mission we set out to do...definitely the most Goofy thing I have done!