

Roundabout Joe

Getting Lost Is the Easy Part; Getting Unlost Is What Takes Real Talent.

BY TITO MORALES

You're in the middle of a run along unfamiliar streets and it suddenly dawns on you that, well, you had in your mind exactly where you wanted to go before you headed out the door, but you somehow took a wrong turn here or there so now . . . OK. Let's cut it straight. You're completely, utterly, and hopelessly lost.

Welcome to the club, Roundabout.

I mean, you sort of think you know where you are. You've still got some juice in your legs, and since you haven't come close to hitting your estimated time of return, you convince yourself that everything's still A-OK in the running universe. At the very least, you're certain you know how to get back if you simply retrace how you got to where you are. That is, if you can remember exactly where you took that one left turn. So you keep plugging along, getting yourself into more and more of a kerfuffle despite your best efforts. Call it the Beaver Cleaver mind-set.

Sometimes, it seems, the legs just seem to want to run—all by themselves—and you're forced to simply go along for the ride. Like the morning I went for a run up in Napa while my wife and I were there celebrating her birthday. I was recuperating from a marathon run just days before and promised her I would be back in about 40 minutes so we could eat breakfast together. Uh-huh. An hour and a half later I was as lost as a faulty Mars Rover and there wasn't a building or pay phone in sight. I did find a couple of morning strollers, though, but their sense of distance and direction was even more impaired than mine. They had me frantically huffing and puffing my way down a street that must have been the only one in the whole of the United States that didn't intersect with any others. Maybe they didn't take kindly to tourists. In any event, the aches and pains I incurred from my foolhardiness left me limping for weeks, and the silent treatment I received from my wife for the rest of that day was not only well earned but is still as vivid to me today as all those endless acres of vineyards.

THE ERROR OF OUR WAYS

While we runners oftentimes like to lose ourselves mentally during the course of our exertions, I doubt that any of us ever really sets off to get lost—that is, unless our running attire includes thick vertical stripes and we've got bloodhounds hot on

our trail. But whenever you venture from the familiarity of well-worn routes, it can happen—especially when your ego and bravura rival your poor sense of direction and even worse judgmental skills.

The truth of the matter is that we Roundabout Joes and Sues never like to admit the error of our ways. That's much more daunting than pushing forward to somehow get back on track. So instead we invent a whole litany of excuses. It's a nuisance to interrupt a run to ask for bearings. It's a sign of weakness to come to grips with the fact that your stubborn efforts are leading you even farther off course. And it's a sign of absolute cowardice to ever pick up a phone and ask for help—as I should have done in Paris.

Ah, *oui*, I'll always have Paris. Running in foreign countries always presents its own set of tribulations, particularly when your language skills have been culled from book titles and cooking shows, such as *Les Miserables* or *soufflé*. The weather was near freezing, but since I felt I knew the *rues* and *boulevards* of the City of Light like the back of my hand, I was determined to take an enjoyable *petite* tour of *le cite* in my running shoes. “Back in about an hour and a half,” I scribbled to the Mrs. on the hotel room's stationery. Some three and a half hours later I was on the verge of hypothermia as I lowered my quivering legs into a tub filled with hot water. After I don't know how many wrong turns, I convinced myself that if I could just find the Seine I would be able to reach familiar territory and find my way back to my hotel. Sure, yeah. I saw more of that winding river than I'll ever care to admit, and to this day I'm convinced that its length rivals that of the Mississippi.

Couldn't I have asked for directions, you ask? It's not the Roundabout Joe style, of course. But I finally did break down and accost a kindly old *monsieur* whose animated intonations and sweeping hand gestures made about as much sense to me as a shivering, non-French-speaking American wearing running tights and no hat made to him. Didn't I bring enough *francs* to simply hop aboard the Metro, you wonder. Of course. But that same stubborn determination that gets us runners through the discomforts of difficult workouts and races rarely, if ever, goes on holiday. And when, at very long last, I finally did spot the Eiffel Tower—well, let's just say that Lance Armstrong was never more relieved to see the Champs-Élysées. Thankfully, my wife had gone out shopping by the time I made it back—bet you never thought you would live to hear a husband say something good about a wife's shopping habits—so I was able to suffer in peace.

LIFE AS A WAYWARD DOG

I'll admit it. My wife has threatened on more than one occasion to surgically implant one of those tracking devices that are becoming popular with owners of wanderlust dogs. Sometimes she suggests that I would lose my head if it wasn't

attached to my body. But just like a dog's gotta bark and a river's gotta flow, a Roundabout Joe's gotta run. Headless or not. And that's surely how it came to be that I recently found myself—how shall I say—disoriented on a ridge trail in Hawaii's Waianae Mountain Range during a long run. Trail running and abysmal navigational skills go together about as well as ice cream over an open fire. But this time I had done my homework. I had reviewed the topographical map over and over again in advance. So I knew exactly where I was going. Until I'd somehow gotten, you guessed it, personally misplaced.

But you can't accuse this Roundabout Joe of not learning from experience, because this time I had a cell phone with me. It wasn't my idea, of course. But she wouldn't tell me where she hid my running shoes unless I promised to take the phone with me, especially because of the surly reputation of the local hunters in those mountains. So when I called her from somewhere in the thick of the wilderness surrounded by an even thicker unexpected rainstorm to let her know that I was, er, *running* a little late, I'm not sure whether the use of the phone and its poor reception was a blessing or a curse. All she could decipher from our multiple broken connections was that I was in trouble.

And when I eventually managed to flag down a rickety truck filled with wild-pig hunters who kindly offered to take me down the hill in the bed of their vehicle crowded with three very large, salivating dogs, what

my wife heard over the course of the shoddy reception was something along the lines of "truck . . . wild-pig hunters . . . pit bulls" and her imagination was left to fill in the blanks while no doubt hearing the pluck of a banjo made famous in a movie starring Ned Beatty.

History doesn't reveal whether or not Pheidippides was the original Roundabout Joe. His collapse at the end of his epic journey may have been due to the fact that he reached the city of Athens by way of Rome. Or, perhaps, he, too, unwittingly found himself face to face with the mighty Seine. Having been a bit navigably confused a time or two myself, I can empathize with the poor messenger's predicament—and it's obvious to this Roundabout that his stressful



Michael Hughes

anguish in taking one wrong turn after another may well have been the catalyst which led to his unfortunate demise.

It's not easy getting misdirected, mind you. For some it takes a lot of practice and know-how. For others, like us Roundabouts, though, getting lost is second nature. It's gotten to the point where my wife doesn't feel completely comfortable with my whereabouts even when I'm off at the local track doing intervals. So together we've come up with a little system, a safety system, if you will, to help keep you other Roundabouts in check and to help give your loved ones at least some measure of peace of mind, we present:

Roundabout Joe's Rules for Staying on Course

1. Always carry some form of identification. If you're home, a photocopy of your driver's license and health insurance card should suffice. When you are on the road, depending on where you are, include a photocopy of your passport and a business card from your hotel. Since sweat and unforeseen moisture wreak havoc on paper, laminate your identification cards.
2. Always carry enough money to be able to phone for a cab or arrange to take some other form of public transportation if necessary. If you're in a foreign country, it's a good idea to be familiar with how to operate the telephones.
3. When you are traveling, prepare for your runs in advance by obtaining routes from local running clubs, running specialty shops, or the hotel staff.
4. Always leave behind a note detailing at least a rough route and, more important, an estimated time of return. It's better to overestimate than to underestimate with the latter. When you are traveling alone, leave this information with the hotel concierge or front desk. If for some reason you find yourself running over schedule, swallow your pride, interrupt your run, and phone ahead to leave word of your delay.
5. For unfamiliar trail runs, always carry a photocopy of a map and consider carrying a small compass. Always bring more water and energy gels or bars than you think you'll ever need.
6. Consider carrying a cell phone. This is particularly important for Roundabout Sues who enjoy running solo. Before you head out the door, program your phone with the number you're most likely to call so that all you need to do if you get into trouble is hit one button.
7. Never ask a fellow Roundabout for directions. In fact, avoid us at all costs.

