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Conquering marathon takes mental toughness

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CORPUS CHRISTI — I knew what to expect from my body: pain.

My mind was what I was most worried about Sunday morning as I stood in the starting chute for the Little Rock Marathon in Arkansas.

I've been running long enough to know my race-day neuroses well. I never think I'm going to make it past the first mile. I have to get over that, and somewhere after three or four miles, I relax and get into my best rhythm.

By 13.1 miles, the distance of a half marathon, my longest race to date, my mind is exhausted from all the pep talks it has to give my body.

So what in the world was going to happen when I ran a full 26.2-mile marathon? I dreaded mile 20, where my training ended and my mental game would have to take over.

It turns out I didn't even make it to mile 20 before my resolve was tested.

This marathon has been a dream of mine for nearly two years. Last year, I trained for the Little Rock Marathon, reaching the peak of the training schedule at a 20-mile run before being diagnosed with a stress fracture in my foot. I spent marathon day on crutches.

This year I stayed healthy. Against all advice I read about first marathons, I set a time goal, one I thought would give me plenty of wiggle room. I was determined to hit that goal.

I started strong, running one of my best half marathon times ever in the first half. I was on pace to beat my time goal handily. This also is against all advice I had heard to start slower than your anticipated pace and run a stronger second half.

So I should not have been surprised when the trouble started soon after the halfway mark. Miles 13, 14 and 15 were mostly uphill. Miles 16 and 17 were pretty steep downhill, which is not as much fun as it sounds.

By mile 18, I was exhausted. I was cursing myself for not doing as much hill training as I should have. I was cursing the Harbor Bridge, my favorite hill run, for being closed for repair the last several months. I was cursing myself again for starting out too strong.

I was convinced the race was never going to end.

I could feel my time goal slipping away.

But somewhere around mile 20, I knew I had a choice. I could either beat myself up for not making that goal, or I could be proud of myself for finishing at all.

I chose the latter. (Not finishing was not an option.)

I was inspired by the people I'd seen all morning on the course. Some were in hand-powered wheelchairs. Some walked the entire race.

The rest of the course was mercifully flatter, and by the last two miles, I was feeling better. I could see the light at the end of tunnel.

There are some benefits to not caring about your time: At the mile 26 sign, I stopped to take a picture with my phone. That gave me time to think about the reality of what I was accomplishing, and I nearly cried when I took off for the final 0.2 miles.

I crossed the finish line at a full sprint and with a smile on my face.

Shortly afterward, a friend asked if I would do another marathon someday.

I answered with my first inclination: "No way. Do you think I'm crazy?"

But then I remembered I said the same thing after my first 5K.