



The Bupa Great North Run by Bill Bryson

It was the eve of the twenty-seventh annual Bupa Great North Run - a day that would be one of the great days of my life, let me say it right here – and, like hundreds of other guests of the Copthorne Hotel in Newcastle, I was slumbering away in peaceful innocence when the night was suddenly rent by the shrill and startling cry of the hotel fire alarm.

Now I'm never good when suddenly awakened- much better to bring me a cup of tea and a folded newspaper and possible a little basket of muffins and pastries – but particularly I am not good when sirens are blaring and sudden urgency is involved. After a few moments of deeply confused and hysterical dressing in the dark, during which I discovered that I was trying to put on the curtains, I managed to stumble into enough clothes not to get arrested, and with my dear wife stepped groggily into the corridor, where we collected our daughter Catherine and son Sam from neighbouring rooms and joined a river of guests quietly leaving the building.

We emerged into chill night air on the quayside and here's the thing: it was wonderful. Truly wonderful. The air was fresh and clean. The sky was studded with twinkly stars. The Tyne was a smear of ebony flowing lazily beside us. My

children excitedly pointed out to me stars of film and television whom they had never expected to see in the flesh, much less in their pyjamas and fluffy hotel dressing gowns. Everyone was remarkably cheerful and good-natured. Many cracked jokes. It was like a large, impromptu pyjama party on the hotel terrace.

“This is terrific,” I said to my wife, genuinely enchanted. “I love the Great North Run.”

“Darling,” she said, speaking slowly, “this isn’t the Great North Run. This is a fire alarm. I knew you shouldn’t have had that last glass of wine.”

“No, I mean the ambience, the cheeriness. Can’t you feel it? There’s something in the air.”

“It’s called frost,” said my son.

“No, it’s excitement,” I insisted. “We’re in for a very big day.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” agreed my wife, “but let’s get the short night over first.”

And with that the all-clear sounded and we traipsed back into the building to steal a few hours sleep before what I now knew, without any doubt, would be a truly memorable day.

I have witnessed a few great sporting spectacles in my time – the Olympics in Sydney, the World Cup in Tokyo and Seoul, the American baseball World Series – and I really do believe that in some ineffable, magical way you can sense it when a big occasion is looming. The excitement becomes almost palpable.

But at Newcastle, there was something extra in the air: cheerfulness. You could follow it, like a lovely aroma, all the way to the starting line. I had seen the Bupa Great North Run on television many times, so the massive scale of it was not entirely a surprise, but the intensity of cheerful anticipation in the air as we arrived at the starting area early the next morning was quite overwhelming. I had never been in the midst of an ocean of good will.

My daughter Catherine was running, which gave the morning an added piquancy. Unlike her Dad, Catherine is a pretty committed runner, but this was her first half-marathon. Cynthia, Sam and I got to watch the preparations from the viewing platform. From where we stood we could watch Sue Barker interviewing a string of celebrities in the TV enclosure or observe the elite runners limbering up just below us, but really it was the cheery swarms behind them, stretching off seemingly to the horizon, that I found transfixing.

The sight of tens of thousands of people discarding their warm-up clothes along the roadside just before the start, and all of these being gathered up for charity, since there is no possibility of reuniting such a mountain of items with the original owners, was an additional touch of goodness that I hadn't anticipated and seemed in consequence almost painfully touching.

Shortly before the start, there arrived in our enclosure the man who is everybody's hero: the great Sir Bobby Robson. I had met him once before, briefly, about a year earlier, in a hospitality suite at a cricket match at Chester-le-Street. One of our hosts, knowing my admiration for Robson, introduced me to him. He was warm and gracious, as you would expect, but at least twenty other people were eager to have his ear, so I spoke with him for only a few moments.

Now, seeing him in the enclosure, I approached him hesitantly to reintroduce myself.

"Oh, hello, Bill," he said warmly, as if we often met like this, and I can tell you I have never been more surprised or proud to be remembered by anybody.

Bobby Robson had not been well that year and he looked tired, but he told me that this was one of the highlights of his life and he wouldn't miss it for the world. We chatted for a few minutes, then he gently excused himself and went off to the starting position to fire the pistol that set in motion the greatest, most good-natured swarm of humanity that I had ever seen. One of the many sights of the day that will stay with me forever

was that of Bobby Robson, patient and resolute, exchanging high fives with a river of passing hands, for at least thirty minutes until the last of smiling stragglers had passed.

Once the runners had passed I felt a touch sorry for myself, frankly, because we would never be able to get past such a mass of humanity – runners and spectators alike – to reach the finishing line in time to see anyone come in. I wasn't nearly ready for the occasion to be at an end yet.

But then we were approached by Sue Foster – possibly the only person in England even nicer than Brendan Foster, her husband – who told us that a helicopter was waiting in a nearby field to take us to the finishing line at South Shields.

Now I've never been a huge fan of helicopters, especially little ones – and this one looked small enough to be on a fairground ride – but the pilot, Paul, was calm and reassuring, and he promised me that he hadn't lost a passenger yet. And it must be said that there is no more magnificent way to appreciate the magnitude and glory of the Bupa Great North Run than to soar up and over it. The sight of a swarm of humanity jogging its way over the Tyne Bridge and onwards towards the distant finishing line was simply stunning.

We landed and had just a little time to look around behind the scenes before watching the first runners race home.

First in for the women was of course Kara Goucher looking impossibly fleet and fresh, followed by Paula Radcliffe.

Catherine, our daughter, crossed the line in an eminently respectable nineteenth place. She was thrilled with her performance, but even more thrilled when, twenty minutes later, she got to meet and be photographed with her great and gracious hero Paula Radcliffe. Two minutes later Brendan Foster came by, learned her time and gave her an enormous spontaneous hug of congratulation that left her with a dazed grin for the rest of the day.

The rest of the afternoon was taken up with wandering through the crowds, examining the displays, and watching in awed amazement the impossibly precise aerial manoeuvrings

of the Red Arrows.

I speak for the Bryson family when I say that we have never collectively enjoyed a more delightful and exciting day. Sam was so taken with the area that he decided the next week to enrol at the University of Northumbria. Catherine and Cynthia asked if we could come back every year.

And I did really enjoy the fire drill. I think they should do it every year.