



It's Not Just 26 Miles

IT MAY SEEM PETTY—arrogant, even—to point out to the ill-informed that a marathon is not just 26 miles. There's that pesky point-freaking-two—385 yards with inestimable importance. In those final moments, races are won and lost, Boston-qualifying dreams come true (or die). The realization that you did it happens, but you still have .2 to go.

"It hurts everywhere if you've done it right," says Des Linden. "And if you've done it wrong, you're suffering. Either way, it hurts."

Go back to Boston 2011, before Linden was our Boston Marathon champion. She turns onto Boylston Street with two other women. The finish is so close, and she surges, taking the lead. Kenya's Caroline Kilel responds, matching her stride for stride. With a little less than 385 yards to go, Linden is just barely ahead before Kilel pulls forward. It becomes a mad dash to the finish, Kilel's gap widens, and Linden finishes behind her by just two seconds.

"How much of a procrastinator are you to have to sprint to the finish of a 26.2-mile race?" Linden says. "It's not over until you cross the line."

That final stretch is a stage showcasing elation, defeat, triumph. Take Paul Tergat and Hendrick Ramaala at the 2005 New York City Marathon, roaring down the final stretch in a battle that put Tergat ahead by one-third—*one-third!*—of a second and left Ramaala fallen, collapsed across the line. Or in 1984, at the first women's Olympic Marathon in L.A. when Gabriela Andersen-Schiess staggered into the stadium 20 minutes behind the first-place finisher, her legs like concrete, suffering from the 86-degree heat, 95-percent humidity, and direct sun. She waved paramedics off and lurched down the track with little control of her extremities for the final .2, the crowd cheering each agonizing stomp until she reached the end. Then there's Shalane Flanagan's New York City

win in 2017 when, with 20 yards to go, she raised her fist and screamed, "Fuck yeah!"

Where did this curse-worthy, exhilarating .2 come from anyway? In the 1908 London Olympics, the marathon started at Windsor Castle and finished in the White City stadium, measuring 26 miles. Until that point, the marathon distance was roughly 24 miles, inspired by the ancient route run by Pheidippides. But the royal family wanted the runners to finish directly in front of their viewing box, which added on 385 yards. For years, the marathon distance varied from 24 to 26.2 miles, but in 1921, for no recorded reason, twenty-six-point-two became official, and we just have to deal with it.

"When it gets down to the .2, there are some runners who say, 'I made it. I'm here.' And they just float to the finish line," says Stephen Walker, Ph.D., a sports psychologist who works with Olympic marathoners. "And then there are those who are wondering whether they're going to make it. They hit the .2 and think, 'My God, I cannot go on. No, this is my last step.'"

Even with no steps to go, legs buckling beneath them, some will do anything to make it, like Devon Bieling at the 2017 Tunnel Vision Marathon. Trying to BQ, she stopped, dropped in a controlled manner and rolled—yes, rolled—through the line in 3:34:02—58 seconds under her 3:35 qualifying standard.

It's a complicated feeling, reaching that 26-mile mark. It's elation when it's approaching, knowing you only have .2 to go. But the final meters grind. They seem endless, a stretch of road that tests your every mental and physical capacity. Only the race you run that day can dictate if you'll surge or flop, sprint or fall. But once you get there, don't be shy: raise your arms in triumph or cry out in pain. This is the moment you've trained for—the final stretch, the end.—*Heather Mayer Irvine*



Point-two never mattered more than on a scorching April day in 1982. In a race measured in miles, Alberto Salazar (2) defeated Dick Beardsley (3) by just a few feet—one of the closest Boston Marathon finishes ever.

BREAKING IT DOWN

385 YARDS OR 3.85 FOOTBALL FIELDS

321.9 METERS 80 PERCENT OF A 400-METER TRACK

.76 PERCENT OF THE MARATHON DISTANCE

1,155 FEET OR 13,860 INCHES

226 JOAN BENOIT SAMUELSONS JOAN IS 5'2"

1,087 ORIGINAL NIKE WAFFLE TRAINERS 12.75 INCHES FOR SIZE 11.5