

## “Making a Deal with God”

At approximately 4pm on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005 I find myself over waist deep in cold and putrid storm waters. I have just been given military strength anti-sickness tablets by my new American doctor friend 10 minutes before – who I have been helping, treat the sick and wounded over the previous 6 days. The tablets apparently will help my immune system ward off infection from dysentery, cholera and MRSA style bugs. I didn't ask questions and neither did my wife Sue, we swallowed them down and headed out into the river of human sewage and stagnate waters.

We had been warned that looters and community residents were getting desperate. FEMA, the National Guard and the local authorities have wholly failed in their support of these poor and now homeless people. Panic is running through the veins and imaginations of every poor soul you see. To that end we have heard gun shots from our dark and isolated hotel room situated in the New Orleans Hilton, Canal Street. We are the only Hotel “NOT” to be evacuated to the “Super Bowl” and to that end Sue and I are apparently the last unaccounted for Brits in New Orleans following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We have now endured the last 6 nights with no food, water, sanitation and the sound of constant gun shots echoes through the dark and un-air-conditioned corridors of the prison which is our 5 star hotel. Indeed on the day of evacuation from this mini hell, we have heard rumours that some looters have been firing on the rescue helicopters and Red Cross ambulances. But if we are going to get away from the city of New Orleans we have to walk through these waters, for over half a mile up Canal Street.

It is at this point; at approximately 4pm on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005 I made my deal with God. “Get my beautiful wife and I out of this hell hole and I will run 10 bloody marathons for you”. Maybe it was my delirious state, seeing that Sue and I hadn't eaten a full meal in ages and we were living on 250 mls of rationed water for the 6 days, also my body was flooded with adrenalin and fear which led me to make the deal/ prayer with God. But I bloody meant every word/ thought and no matter what you're personal running God looks like or sounds like. Mine at that precise moment in time was a big white haired, white bearded omnipresent Monty python-esque Irish Roman Catholic deity, and he delivered on his side of bargain and I was not about to risk whelching on my side of the deal. Here begins my running career and the long and blistered filled road to the Namib Desert in April 2009.

Fast forward 6 months, and you can see this 33 years old 18stone, chain smoking Northern Pie Eater wishing he had not had the 8 pints of Guinness a couple of days before lining up on a cold and sunny Sunday morning in Greenwich park – and he is about to pay the piper to the tune of 26.2 hard fought miles. I finished my first Flora London Marathon in 5 hours and 28 minutes. From mile 18 (somewhere that is the purgatory known as Canary Wharf) I began wishing I was back in the Southern United States – begging for a sniper to take me out. But when I cross the line, sometime late Sunday, early Monday – I genuinely feel a sense of achievement and pride you rarely feel during, or should I say enduring your normal 9-5 existence. When I received my medal from a diligent boy scout at the end of the mall, with

people screaming “well done”, “move along”, “get a drink” etc; all I wanted was to see, my wife, Sue and get a hug. She was getting worried, as the Ladies Octogenarian running club had come in some 90 minutes earlier – and when the one legged, blind and sprightly world war one Tommy came in pulling his Iron lung and I was still nowhere to be seen – she really began to get worried. But I did finish, and was prouder of that finish in 5 hours 28 minutes then any subsequent marathon finish. When I saw Sue I began crying like a baby. I still cry at the end of each marathon. But it is now more of a Red Butler “gone with the wind – don’t give a damn” snuffle – rather than that first-time which was more Rugrats “The Movie”.

Since then I have run the FLM 07, The Snowdonia Marathon 07, The Highlands Marathon 08, The Marathon of Hastings 08 and at the time of print I will have completed two Ultra Marathons in sunny Yorkshire – two 29 milers down the canal of Grantham to be completed over approximately 24 hours.

Well that makes 7. And because believe it or not my natural go to Gene is that of the last Northern Pie Eater, still. I have decided to get 8, 9 and 10 out of the way in one go. 11<sup>th</sup> April 09 is going to be a long 24 hours, but one that will hopefully see me in the clear with the big guy in the sky – and I can go back to concentrating on what I am good at. Smoking, eating and drinking.

New Orleans really did change my life. I am not a natural runner. Being a 6ft 4, and still 15 and half stone, ex rugby league legend (well I was in St Mary’s High School, Leigh- team of 85). Running does not come easy to me. But I love it. I love the honesty of it. You can’t blag 26 miles. You are either ready and prepared or you are not. Easy. That first marathon start on the roads of Greenwich will stay with me forever – 25,000 people all moving in the same direction. Bodies rhythmically bobbing up and down in perfect unison to the sounds and colours of our incredible capital city. No matter the age, disability, fitness levels, intelligence, colour, creed, religious believes, prejudices or stresses of the runners; for a split second I noticed all of us moving together in the same direction. Propelling yourself forward in this way has helped me to deal with the stress of that day in New Orleans, but it has become far more than that now. It has become a gift with a far greater value than that original deal with God. Knowing that I can just put my trainers on and move forward wherever and whenever I desire – no matter the obstacle (I would probably use the walk up Canal Street as a trial run now) is priceless. And I want Namibia to be my greatest challenge and greatest question. And so it should be.

I am not taking the race lightly, nor is it a therapy session for me. It is my own personal test. I want to quantify how far I have grown since that day in New Orleans. And this test should be difficult and far reaching both physically and mentally. I have never trained so hard, running over 50 – 70 miles a week. My life is immersed in this bloody race; the training, kit, advice, raising money for my charity ([www.onefranandhisdog.com](http://www.onefranandhisdog.com)), family time sacrifices and way to much time to think by myself. But if I am lucky enough to finish this race not only will it be debt paid, it will be my greatest investment. I will be happy with 23 hours, 59 minutes and 59 seconds – I am not going to be worrying Andy, Alex or Simon – But for that first few

yards we will all be moving in the same direction, at the same time with the same goal. To finish. We are so lucky to be doing this race together and I for one am truly excited, energised and proud that we have this adventure to enjoy together.

For Your Information. I am doing marathon 11 at the end of April 09– I am going to break 4 hours for 26.2 miles if it kills me. But that is a different story, challenge and that one is just for me. I hope your training is going well and you are loving this as much as me. Take care. Fran.