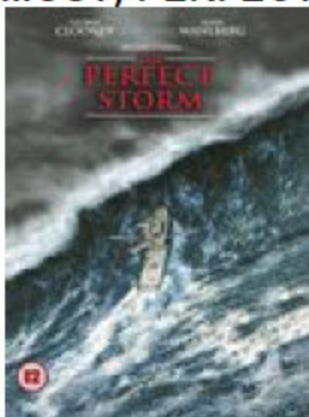


“DODGING A BULLET” THE (ALMOST) PERFECT STORM



MY 2007 B.A.A. BOSTON MARATHON EXPERIENCE

By Dave McGillivray, Race Director

I looked at the long range weather forecast on the internet ten days out from the race. I couldn't believe my eyes – rain, rain, rain and more rain – for the entire week AND for race day! I copied it and sent it to the entire Organizing Committee saying, “okay, everyone, get ready.” I began feeling like the folks in Florida before a predicted hurricane is about to hit – batten down the hatches. I just hoped we didn't have to “evacuate”, too.

Then came the dagger – about 5-6 days out, a local meteorologist reported that a Nor'easter was on the way and it “could be” a storm of “epic proportions!” Nice. He then went on to say that if the storm develops to its full potential that, “I don't see how they could run the marathon. If this storms hits, it seems that they would have to cancel the race.” That alone pretty much put everyone in a state of hysteria. The power of the media!

Calls and emails began pouring in, “I heard the race is being cancelled!” I received a call from WBZ radio asking me what our position was – I clearly stated that we were concerned and we would be monitoring the weather but that the race was still a go. Talk about doing damage control. The number one topic in Boston became whether “they” would ever cancel the marathon.

The forecast called for a bad day on Thursday (which it was), okay days on Friday and Saturday (which they were) and then we'd really get whacked on Sunday and Monday again (which we did).

All the focus and I mean ALL the focus now became the weather. Even though we had changed the starting time from 12 noon to 10am, a historic change, the weather was the story and the time change was buried. The list of questions began to grow....what can we do to protect the runners? How can we better plan and prepare for this type of weather? What if the temperature drops and we actually have snow? Plans already started to quickly change – we decided to hold off setting up the large tents in the Athletes' Village from Wednesday and Thursday to Saturday. We sent out an email blast to all the participants making them aware of the predicted conditions and advised them to plan accordingly. We also produced a flyer to be given out to every runner at race registration

which detailed our concerns for hypothermia along with information as to how best to prevent it. And, we even purchased over 5,000 "ponchos" for our volunteers.

We had our regularly scheduled MEMA (Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency) meeting on Thursday morning at 10am. I've never seen this meeting so jam packed. Over 150 representatives from all the federal, state and local public safety agencies were present. With this level of attendance, I really sensed that something big was about to happen...the Undersecretary of Public Safety, FBI, State Police, National Guard, city and town police and fire, EMS, Civil Air Patrol, FAA, MBTA, DPWs from each town, Department of Public Health...they all were there, like me, looking for information.

I recalled all the meetings we had already had with all these folks during the past 3-4 months. One session in particular that we always conducted was our "table top" exercise where we introduce "hypothetical" scenarios and attempt to work through them as if they were actually going to happen, for example, bomb scares, fires along the course, and of course weather-related concerns like lightening and other severe weather conditions. Well, here we are and it is no longer hypothetical, it is now real...no more playing around.

I spoke first at the meeting and detailed just "some" of my operational concerns. It was a long list, involving dealing with the new start time, the effects of wind, cold, rain and even sleet and snow, transport and shelter along the route if necessary, the impact of the weather on volunteers as well as competitors, possible effects on the wheelchair group, getting more shelter in Hopkinton, and on and on.

Of course, many of the things we were thinking about and worried about most others (runners) weren't even considering – why would they? Runners just needed to be concerned about themselves...we needed to be concerned about everything and everyone. Similarly, many things that others were bringing up at the meeting even I never gave much thought to. As prepared and as experienced as we all were, this was the first time in my 20 years involved in this race that I truly began to "worry" about how we were going to get through this. For the first time since I've been involved, the concept of a potential cancellation was real and no longer a hypothetical exercise. My thoughts immediately wandering back to September of last year when I was faced with a similar challenge with another race I was directing, the Boston Triathlon, an event that I actually decided to cancel because of similar weather, mainly due to the impact on the swim and bike disciplines. This was the first time in my career that I had ever cancelled an event. However, the stakes were much higher this time around with the Boston Marathon.

The MEMA meeting lasted about 2 hours. Immediately following the meeting about 10 of us stayed behind and convened a smaller meeting to decide our action steps from here and to discuss decision making policy – who would make the call, how and when would it be made? Even while at this meeting we got a report that one or more of the VMB (Variable Message Boards) out along the course were mistakenly programmed and displaying that the race was on April 17th, not April 16th, giving people the impression we had ALREADY postponed the race to the next day!! Go figure!

We all agreed to continue to plan and to continue to monitor the weather forecast and to continue to meet via conference call with the next one being the very next day, Friday, at 9:30am.

On the call, we had the National Weather Service on giving us the weather update. They were predicting temperatures in the mid-30's, winds out of the E/NE (headwinds) steady at 20-30 mph with gusts up to 50-60mph and wind chill in the 20's. It really didn't look too promising. They did say, however, that all this "could" taper off mid-morning on Monday and that Sunday we would be getting the brunt of it. We decided to have another conference call on Sunday at 2:30pm.

On Saturday and Sunday I was part of the Runner's World clinics at the race expo. With me was Josh Nemzer, course coordinator. Each session was jammed with runners and we knew why...they wanted answers about the weather. We certainly answered all their questions and reassured them that we were all in this thing together and that all of us take the hit together. I asked for a show of hands as to who thought we should cancel the event...not one raised their hand.

Meanwhile we continued to make adjustments and plans for protecting the runners. We increased the amount of buses along the course for both shelter and transportation back to Boston for those dropping out which we predicted could be at an all time high. The cities/towns along the course identified facilities on the course which would open their doors and become shelters for the runners to get warm. We worked out a plan with the bus company to retain about 130 buses and keep them longer so runners could stay on them longer in Hopkinton to keep out of the cold, rainy, windy conditions. Of course, all our medical personnel were preparing for an onslaught of hypothermia cases. We added heat to many of our tents. We were doing everything we could do to prepare to keep runners warm and dry.

Sunday came and we thought the weather was going to come in early and possibly impact our 2 ½ mile Freedom Run event which had about 3,000 participants. However, it really didn't start to rain until later in the morning so we got that event in. Then the skies opened up and the winds began howling. The show was on.

After conducting an elite athlete meeting at 9:30am on Sunday, I drove out to Hopkinton at about 1:30pm to assess the set up and the damage that had already been done. Needless to say, not many runners were visiting the start in Hopkinton as is typically the case.

At 2:30pm, we had our FINAL public safety conference call. About 30 folks were on the call. Of course, the focus was on the all important weather forecast from the National Weather Service. Bottom line, the forecast seemed more encouraging, but, again, it was a "forecast" and here in NE forecasts are known to change on a dime. However, this was it...if there was ever a time to decide to "cancel" the race, this was the time to do it as everyone was on the call and a cancellation could have easily been executed and communicated. As everyone started to leave the call and I heard all



those hang up tones, I took a deep breath and said, "well, that's it, full steam ahead." I knew it would be difficult if not impossible to cancel once everyone hung up from this call. Although I felt relieved given the current forecast, I still wasn't honestly sure. I so wanted to call everyone back.

And wouldn't you know it, after the call, the wind really started picking up and the rain was really coming down now. Earlier in the morning it was actually snowing out in Hopkinton. Evidence of this were small piles of snow around the tents from where it had slid off the top of the tents. Major puddles were forming around the upper field tent as well as in and UNDER the lower field tent from the run off of the upper field. And, they were predicting at least 3-4 more inches of rain throughout the evening. I walked the fields by myself around 5pm, looked up at the sky and a deep concern overcame me as to where we were going to be able to stage 20,000+ runners in conditions like this. If the conditions didn't improve, we could be in serious trouble.

On the drive back to Boston, I kept getting phone calls from the media...local tv and newspapers, The Weather Channel and many others. They wanted to know what we were going to do. They knew the conditions were bad. I wasn't about to call them back until I felt more convinced that we were making the right decision. I called Guy Morse (Executive Director), Jack Fleming (Director of Communications) and Amy Dominici (Executive Office of Public Safety) and suggested that we all meet in the hotel at 6:30pm to discuss my concerns and what our actions steps should be. Also joining us were Ed Jacobs (Technical Producer), Barbara Sicuso (Director of Registration), Chris Troyanos (Medical Services Coordinator), Rich Havens (Finish Area Coordinator) and Josh Nemzer (Course Coordinator) and my son, Ryan. While at the meeting, I called Chief Tom Irvin of the Hopkinton Police Department expressing all my concerns. Lt. Ken Clark from the Hopkinton Fire Department happened to be in the hotel and also joined us. Guy called Jack Phelan, Superintendent of Hopkinton Schools requesting use of the High School and Middle Schools as well as the football field which was up until then off limits. Ed Jacobs called a few tent companies to determine if we could get more tenting even at the last minute (even though we didn't really have much space to put them). Jack called the media updating them. We concluded that the best we could do at this time was to continue to inform the runners of the conditions they were about to face and to encourage them and tell them to individually prepare for these conditions. They needed to help themselves...that was the only way this would work. Jack arranged for WBZ TV to come and interview me at 9:30pm so as to help get that word out to everyone as best we could. The more prepared the runners were, the greater chance of all of us surviving this.

The B.A.A. Board of Governors were all assembled in one of the function rooms in the hotel so Guy and I went in and explained to all of them the situation and our concerns but also assured them that we were doing all we could do to address all the weather concerns and that we were confident in our planning.

I went back to my room with my son Ryan for the evening. The rain was really coming down now and the wind was really picking up. I called Mike Thompson a number of times as he was staying in a motor home at the Village. He did confirm the conditions but he didn't seem overly concerned just yet which helped put my mind at ease....just a bit.

I was not able to sleep a wink due to a wandering mind and the pelting of the rain on my hotel window. I was thinking all the worst thoughts. I got up from bed about 10 times just to look out the window. Sleeping was useless. Finally, I jumped out of bed at about 3am and said "this is nonsense", I need information. What good am I in bed? I desperately need more information. What was happening at the Village? Was there flooding along the course? Were there power outages or tree limbs down? Were all our structures still standing? Not having this information was nerve racking. For the first time in my race management career I can honestly say I was worried, nervous, afraid and anxious all at the same time, mainly due to the unknown. My phone hadn't rung once throughout the night so I took this as a good sign...no news is good news...so I thought.

I then called Amy Dominici from the Executive Office of Public Safety. I asked her if she would contact MEMA and see if she could get me any information regarding the current forecast and the course conditions. I then called Tom Grilk, President of the BAA, at 4am and expressed to him my concerns. The thought of cancellation was not far from my mind but time was running out. It was becoming a catch 22...it seemed that the conditions were worsening but the time to do anything was slipping away. If we were to even remotely consider cancellation, it really needed to be done BEFORE runners started to board our buses in Boston for Hopkinton, which began around 5:45am. John Tommaney of MEMA then called me at about 5am with his assessment of things. He believed that the wind and rain would taper off and that conditions would improve. He also indicated that he had not heard of any major course concerns, at least not yet. That's all I needed to hear...all systems go, no looking back now, I'm outta here.

At 5:15am, Josh, Barbara, Ryan and I headed out to Hopkinton in a Boston Police cruiser. It was really coming down still. I really didn't know what to expect from this point forward but what I did know is that we were going to have a race and I focused all my attention on how best to manage the damage that already had been done as well as the current conditions. Mike and his team seemed to have the Village somewhat under control given the circumstances (this was a huge help) so I headed downtown to meet up with Andy Deschenes (Start Line Coordinator), Jay Arthur (Start Line Technical Coordinator) and Bob Barnaby (Start Area Coordinator) at the start.

Throughout the morning, the winds and rains kept coming and going. Mother Nature was playing an emotional game with all of us. Just when you thought it was clearing, the rain and wind would come back. Then all the bad news started coming in – port-o-johns at the Village were blowing over, buses were backed up on the highway and there was a power line down right across the road only 2-3 miles away in Ashland, with no guarantee when it would be removed. Reports of volunteer no shows and other town concerns (tree limbs down, flooding, etc.) made for a trying time. The biggest concern now was whether we would have to delay the start of any of the races – the problem being if you delay one, you have to delay them all.



But then, around 8am, it seemed that things started to turn for the better. Things just started to come together. All reports were more positive. I was told the power line in Ashland would be removed no later than 9:15am, 10-minutes before the start of the wheelchair race (a bit too close for comfort but at this stage I'll take anything I can get). However, we needed to get the four athletes off in the Mobility Impaired Division first at 9am. Just when we were set to go, I get a report that we needed to delay for 2-minutes. For this division, that is not a big deal, however, was this a sign of things to come? In my 20 years of doing this at the Boston Marathon, I have never had to delay any start, not even for one second. But, it was certainly better to be safe than sorry. Two minutes later I gave the signal for them to start and the 2007 Boston Marathon was "officially" underway.

Incredibly, the temperatures weren't as bad as they had predicted. They were actually in the 40's, about 10-15 degrees higher than anticipated. Runners were arriving with plastic bags on them and on their feet.



The schools were opened and provided shelter for about 3,000 runners. The later buses provided needed shelter for the runners arriving closer to race time. The runners orderly left their shelters and headed for the corrals. The contingency plans implemented the few days before all seemed to be working well. Everything else just fell into place. Wheelchairs came out and lined up. Their "controlled" start was on time at 9:25am.



No mishaps down the first ½ mile decline. The elite women then came out and their start was also on time at 9:35am.



And then the elite men came out right on time and of course they and wave 1 got started right on time at 10:00am as did wave 2 at 10:30am.



When it was all said and done, go figure, it was one of our most successful marathons of all time...98.6% finishing rate, very few medical problems, most areas reported a very successful day and the high no show rate, both runners and volunteers, never really materialized. It seemed that most wanted to be part of this epic day.



On a personal note, I thought my string of Boston Marathons was in serious jeopardy all weekend and all day. I hardly ever once gave it any serious thought though. My goal was 24,000 runners...not my individual run. No way did I think I would start the run, never mind finish. However, I had my easiest day in a long while finishing at 7:33pm with Josh Nemzer, Doug Kaplan and Tom O'Brien. I have no clue how that happened. It just should not have. Family and friends were there at the finish to greet us, including Joan Samuelson, Guy Morse and Tom Grilk.



Lessons learned...

A final note...the most often asked question of the week by both the media and everyone else was...so, what would it take to cancel this event? I've learned that there is no formula. The most important factor is receiving "credible data" within which to base your decision on. For the most part, you are in more of a "no win" situation when the weather turns against you. If you cancel, many will be upset. If you don't and people get hurt, you are liable. It's not only the runners you have to consider – they are just responsible for one person, themselves. You are responsible for all of them, plus all the volunteers and all the workers and the media and a case can be made that you could even be responsible for the well-being of the spectators, too. The runners feel they can run through anything...and most probably can...but, can the race organizers deliver on the operational plan....that is more the question.

Additionally, you can't prematurely make critical decisions. You have to get close enough to almost touch it and feel it but not so close that it becomes too late. A few days out? The night before? The morning of? Time sensitivity is critical to carrying out the safest plan. It is tough to base decisions on forecasts and predictions. It is much easier to base it on damage already done.

I don't believe any mistakes of any significance were made. If anything, the area I would need to address more in the future is the timeframe between the night before (5pm) and the early morning of (5am). If the weather did not turn, what would we have done and how would this have been accomplished if all the decision makers are spread out over 26 miles?

Our entire experience was a learning one. Even after so many years of doing this, we are still learning as it is an ever changing event. As a team, we were as prepared as anyone could have been. If this had to happen at a major race, it is probably good it happened here (in retrospect only!) given the level of preparedness of all those involved (winning is the science of being prepared). I also learned that in an event of this magnitude, it is generally best to stick with the original plan as much as possible due mainly to the fact that it is virtually impossible to communicate change to so many people so late in the game. Many times when trying to put out one fire you actually create many more.

In the aftermath of this occurrence, the word of the day for me is PERSPECTIVE, that is, making an objective assessment of what occurred while giving all the elements their comparative importance. We all need to keep this in perspective. We went from experiencing a potential disaster to conducting one of our most

successful marathons of all time. A little luck...perhaps. But, I believe an experienced and dedicated BAA TEAM along with runner's who truly cooperated and took care of themselves as well as a desire by everyone to persevere is what carried us through this ordeal of "epic proportions."

Dave McGillivray
Race Director

* Photos by Fay Photo, Victah Sailor, Susan West