

Followed by Tragedy

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In 1986 I was at a National Team training camp in Ft. Lauderdale Florida when the Challenger exploded. My training partners and I had just returned from a 20-mile workout and were stretching when the news came on the television. Too young to remember the 1967 Apollo 1 tragedy, this was my first real experience with such a national loss. I recall being glued to the television, watching the heart-wrenching images over and over. My training log shows that I dealt with the tragedy the one way I knew: by going out for an easy 10 miles the next morning.

On February 26th, 1993 I was in New York, relaxing in my room at the New York Athletic Club before the US Indoor Track & Field Championships when a truck bomb exploded in the parking garage below Tower One of the World Trade Center. I went out for an easy 30-minute 5K in Central Park, then took a cab to the meet instead of the subway after the news began hinting that the explosion was a terrorist act.

On September 9th, 2001 I was in New Jersey competing in the National 40K Championship at Ft. Monmouth. I stayed with my mother in New York so I had to drive down the Jersey Turnpike the morning of the 10th to fly out of Newark Airport. I remember how beautiful and clear the day was, and was struck by the sight of the morning sunlight reflecting off the towers of the World Trade Center across New York Harbor. I was snapped out of my daydream by a massive traffic jam as I approached the airport. Several rolls of tar paper had caught fire on the roof of one of the terminals so one of the airport approaches was closed. I barely made my flight out. The same time the next morning the inconvenience was made moot by the sight of jets crashing into the same towers I had marveled at less than 24 hours earlier.

In February of this year I was in Cocoa Beach Florida conducting one of my World Class racewalking clinics. I got up early to do an easy 10K workout from Cocoa Beach to Cape Canaveral, then stretched, showered and headed to the track for the clinic. I was staying with a NASA engineer who told us the shuttle would be landing at 9:16am so we took a break just before that time to watch for the incoming shuttle and listen for the sonic boom. It never came. It was a beautiful clear morning, so my host had a gut feeling that something was wrong. At lunch her fears were confirmed as every television was tuned to the breakup of the shuttle over Texas. That afternoon I ran on the beach to clear my head. I'm not sure what any of this means. I don't believe in fate or bad luck. I believe coincidences are just that. But I am starting to feel like Woody Allen's "Zelig" or, more likely, Forrest Gump, running and walking in close proximity to events of national significance. And like Gump, I deal with bad news by walking and running. Not running away, just running.

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