

Just When You Thought You'd Seen It All...

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Despite hernia surgery and a hepatitis attack just before the '92 Olympic Trials, I was in pretty good shape but disappointed at not making The Team. I decided to race a 20K three weeks later at New York's Empire State Games in Albany, hoping to hit a fast time to prove my fitness. It was a cool, rainy day—great weather compared to the horrible conditions at the trials in New Orleans. The course had several tight, single-cone turn-arounds, including one that came just a few feet before a curb that dropped off into a parking lot, but it was still relatively flat and fast.

Approaching this turn on my second lap of the 2K course I saw a small boy sitting behind the cone with an umbrella, entirely blocking the turn. I shouted a few times but he didn't seem to hear me so I continued on, not wanting to startle him. Just as I was about to go around him he heard me and jumped up in exactly the wrong spot. I was pretty proud of the way I handled it, putting my hand on his shoulder and pivoting around him without falling off the curb into the parking lot or knocking him over.

I continued on, not thinking another thing about it, hitting splits of 21:30, 43:27, 1:05:12—on pace for my first sub-1:27:00 20K, and feeling great. With about 400 meters to go and the finish line in sight I was confronted by a police car coming towards me right on the course. I moved closer to the water tables to get out of the way, but the car kept coming at me. When it was about 30 meters away the cop pulled a Starsky & Hutch, braking and sharply cutting the wheel so the car turned sideways and stopped directly in front of me. I tried to squeeze past but the knucklehead threw open his door, hitting me in the hip. "Officer Prendergast" grabbed me by the arm, threw me against the car and slammed my chin against the roof. He kept yelling, asking me if I knew what "this" was all about and demanding identification—keep in mind I had identification numbers pinned to my front and back...

Super Cop finally fumed, "Nobody roughs little kids up on my beat," which finally gave me my first clue what was happening. Before long every judge, volunteer and spectator within a half mile came running over to find out why I was about to be handcuffed. I was permitted to finish—in 1:28:45, 9 seconds slower than my PR—after race officials promised I wouldn't go anywhere afterwards. Within minutes I was led away and taken to the police station. The father, who apparently misunderstood his four-year-old son's description of the event and thought someone was trying to abduct the kid, never showed up to press charges so I got off with a warning. Prendergast didn't get off so easy; I went to the press room and told every newspaper in New York what happened. Even the New York Times picked it up.

I'm still trying to figure out the moral of the story, but there's probably some great sports psychology message in there somewhere...

[*Back to homepage](#)
