

extreme GRACE

Friends of the Master

It was a day when the winners lost and the losers won. More than a thousand runners lined up near the white sand of Gordon's Bay, South Africa, each determined to win the 2002 Toyota False Bay Marathon. The route begins at sea level and then runs for 50 kilometers past the surfers at Kogel Bay, through the resort village of Rooi Els, up and over several passes, and then finally into the beautiful seaside village of Kleinmond.

The starter's gun sent the throng off at a blistering pace—experienced winners first, thousands of others chasing along behind. The favorites quickly moved to the front at Kogel Bay. All was well on the marathon.

Marathon rules are simple: run, stay on the track, run, no assistance, run! This year a new rule was added, one to assure an honest race. "All runners must attach a small computer chip to their running shoes. This chip will register your time as you cross both the start and finish lines. It will also check on you several times during the race."

So they ran, a thousand computer chips flashing seconds to the judges. Crowds lined the tarmac around the curve at Kogel Bay. More stood on the boulders beneath Hein's Peak. Others drank cappuccino at roadside restaurants, rocked in their veran-

da chairs, or stood expectantly at the finish line. All cheered as their favorites flew by.

Beth von Horsten and Keith Court ran faster than all the others, dueling would-be competitors with every stride. Keith, a crowd favorite, seemed to soak up the encouraging shouts and run even harder. Beth ignored everyone and just ran.

The finish was not even close. Keith ran through the tape with his hands held high and his legs pumping in a victory dance. Beth came to the line smiling, her fists thrust to the sky in excitement.

Then, suddenly, Beth's excitement turned to hysterical tears. Early that morning she had decided to wear a different pair of running shoes, and she had forgotten to move the computer chip to the new shoes. As she crossed the finish line, she looked down and realized the chip was still at home, safely clipped to the shoes she had chosen not to wear. There would be no victory for Beth. She had come in first in the women's group: best time, best run, best style, stupidist move.

Keith's story was different. His computer chip was clipped securely to his shoes. However, on the back side of the mountain, he had accepted assistance from a friend. Twice. Other runners had seen and reported the rule-

breaking to the judges. Victorious Keith was disqualified. Two winners in. Two losers out.

Two others took their places in victory lane—two losers who had followed the rules and become winners.

The story made my heart stop with sadness. It also took me back to several stories Jesus told folks who thought they had it all together with God.

Remember the servant to whom the Master gave one talent for safekeeping?

Remember the wealthy friends who were invited to the Master's banquet?

Remember the five foolish virgins who came late to the Master's wedding?

The servant buried the talent—and lost it all.

The friends stayed home to do "more important stuff," and their places were taken

by orphans and street people.

The virgins knocked on the door only to hear the Master say, "Sorry. You never allowed us to become friends."

All knew the rules. All thought they were "friends" of the Master. But, all ignored the Master's expectations, made up their own rules, and lost out on heaven. Like Beth and Keith, they watched as others celebrated the victory.

"And so," says the apostle Paul, "run the race like one who truly wants to win the prize."

Dick Duerksen

