



## THE MODEST PROPOSAL

# Too Much of a Good Thing

This sweating-for-charity business has gotten out of control. We need more gain, less pain. By Kris Frieswick

Each summer, as waves of friends, relatives, and coworkers approach with sneakers laced and donation sheets out, we Bostonians find ourselves wrestling the moral dilemmas brought on by the charity-a-thon season. When they ask us to support them as they walk, run, bike, skip, or dance for a worthy cause, we always write the check, because that's the right thing to do, and, more importantly, saying no makes us feel crappy. But while we don't question the idea of philanthropy, much less that of jogging, we (okay, *some* of us) wonder whether there isn't a better way to raise money, one that makes smarter use of all these sweaty people in matching T-shirts.

"I never got hit up this hard when I lived in Chicago and San Francisco," says Karen DeTemple, herself a fundraising consultant. "Boston is such a small town. I have to select a couple of

charities and say no to the rest." But that coping strategy goes only so far, and by this time of year it's perhaps forgivable to feel a touch of resentment at these human tides and the accompanying traffic tie-ups they cause, not to mention the bad folk music at the finish-line party. The irritation only increases if you think these massive productions are notoriously inefficient. The 2003 Susan G. Komen Boston Race for the Cure, for instance, brought in more than \$326,000, but spent more than \$118,000 to do so. Yet according to charity watchdogs, that practically qualifies it as a well-oiled machine.

"Why do people donate more to charity when someone is breaking their ass?" asks Herbert Gintis, an economist and professor emeritus at UMass-Amherst. "It's a waste of time, it's a pain. Why don't you just give the money [directly

to the organization]?" The answer, as Gintis knows, is that generosity often requires a prod. According to professional spelunkers of the human psyche, the reality is that without these events, a lot of people wouldn't give at all. In order to wrest a few coins from us, charities have to enlist people willing to risk life and limb by pedaling from here to Provincetown while braving homicidal motorists and iffy weather.

So we're stuck with the group-exercise-as-fundraiser model. But that doesn't mean we can't approach it more strategically. Why not have all the charities combine their a-thons into a single massive one-day affair—an a-thon-a-thon, if you will—thus sparing the rest of us for the rest of the year? Just imagine the millions that could be raised, the sheer inspirational power of tens of thousands of spandexed thighs chugging down Storrow Drive. It would save money, make a huge public relations splash, and unclog the intersections for those still too stingy, or lazy, to get involved. Only the T-shirt printers would stand to lose.

## ON THE CONTRARY: Our drivers fail to get their due.

In a new survey gauging knowledge of basic traffic laws, Massachusetts drivers rank second worst, behind Rhode Island's. (Oh, so you yield to people in crosswalks. Who knew?) Only second lowest? We demand a retest. We know we can do worse than that.