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EVERYDAY ECONOMICS

Monday's Boston Marathon provides yet more data illustrating that arbitrary numbers can serve as motivating goals.

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Justin Wolfers

George Wu, who is not only a keen student of the sport, but also a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago, spent Monday night downloading the official times of all 31,805 finishers. The distribution of finishing times follows the same pattern I highlighted in this morning's column, with a statistically improbable clumping of runners finishing just before their goals of 3, 3.5 or 4 hours, and an accompanying "gap" with far fewer runners finishing just minutes after their goals. Befitting Boston's reputation as a race for truly competitive runners, there's less evidence of such goals mattering for those aiming to beat 5 or 6 hours.

To those who met their goals, congratulations. To those who missed,

realize that it's just an arbitrary number. And to Meb Keflezighi, who achieved the ultimate goal: Wow.

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