

First Marathon

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On November 2nd 2003 I ran my first marathon! It has been almost a week since I crossed that finish line and my feet are still tender. I have three or four toenails at risk and it took a couple of days before I could actually walk downstairs without using both hands on the banister. Why you ask, would an otherwise sane person run 26.2 miles just for the hell of it?

Running has never been a sport which I really enjoyed or one in which I demonstrated any particular talent. Even when I got hooked on triathlons the run leg was the one that I dreaded the most. Triathlon coaches and other pundits say that you have to focus on your limiters and the rest will take care of itself. So in April I paid \$7 to enter the lottery for the NYC Marathon. I figured that I had about a one in three chance of getting drawn so I ought to have at least a year or two to get ready.

Dumb luck! In June I found out that I had been drawn and was now seriously on the hook. First thing I did was go to the ingnycmarathon.com web site and start downloading information about training. I picked an 18-week training schedule for first time marathon runners and tacked it on my wall at work. Each day I would cross off the miles after I ran them. The weekly miles were run on a treadmill at the gym. On the weekends, long runs were done with my buddies from the Taconic Road Runners Club.

My worst fear for race day was that the weather would be cold, wet and windy. Luckily after 420 training miles my worst fear never materialized. The weather was great, too warm even for some. To say the start was interesting is an understatement. You have over thirty thousand pumped up runners all in one place. Modesty was set aside for those that had to empty their bladder one last time. Some of the runners got all dressed up. I even saw one bloke in Army fatigues and boots wearing a 40 lb backpack.

At 10:10 am the cannon went off and we started shuffling to the start. It took me 1m32s to get to the mats where the chip on my shoe triggered the clock that would track my net time. The first mile was uphill to the crest of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge where some of the best views of the race were to be had. The start was slow but the energy of the crowd staggering.

The first mile is usually the hardest for me but not then. I had a plan and I was sticking to it. I did my long runs at around an 8m30s pace so I had dialed that back to 8m45s and at 20 miles I was going to re-evaluate. My primary goal was simply to finish, the only unacceptable time being DNF (Did Not Finish). Perhaps foolishly I had also hoped to finish in under 4 hours and was wearing a 3h50m pace band around my wrist. As we started down the bridge I was being disciplined and keeping to my planned pace. I had heard many stories about people starting too fast only to blowup at the end.

Within two miles of the start of the race we had left Staten Island and entered Brooklyn, the second of the five NYC boroughs that we would traverse. There we encountered the first of about two million spectators that we would pass on our way to Central Park. We were running three different courses depending on the color of your bib. I was a blue runner and at mile 3.5 the green runners merged with us. Fourth Avenue was converted to a river of runners as far as the eye could see. I was a surfer riding a human Tsunami!

My first 10k came and went. At mile 8 the red runners merged with us. We had been running for over an hour. I was on pace. I was feeling good. I had taken water or Gatorade at every mile since mile 3. Soon I passed the halfway point. Brooklyn gave way to Queens and I was into my second hour of running. At some point I could see the Citicorp center in midtown. It was a long way off but my goal was in sight.

When I arrived at the Queensborough Bridge all of the elite runners had already finished the race. Runners from Kenya had won both the men's and women's divisions and a new course record had been set for the women. The bridge was tough. I was running next to a seventy year old Japanese man who still looked strong. I was beginning to fade. I struggled with the long uphill. At last it began to flatten and soon we arrived in Manhattan.



Through Brooklyn and Queens the crowds were great. Bands and boom boxes played loud music. People congregated under bridges where their applause was amplified and they partied on balconies overlooking the course. By the time we got to Manhattan the crowds had multiplied. I was especially motivated at this point because just a couple of miles up the road I had my own modest collection of supporters. Yvonne had organized a marathon of her own with a dozen friends. It began with brunch followed by sprints to various vantage points. Fierce crowds had to be braved in order to lend but a few brief words of encouragement. It is a selfless act to come watch someone run a marathon. As a runner, knowing that someone in the crowd is there for you really makes all the difference.

On entering Manhattan I had realized that I was pushing myself too hard. As I tore the 3h50m pace band from my wrist I decided to focus on my primary objective. Any finishing time would be a personal record. At mile 19 I hit the wall hard. As I reached for the cup of water being offered to me I slowed to a walk for the first time. Three hours into the race and my legs were spent. From here to the finish I would suffer. At each water stop I would walk for one minute and then start running. My pace had slowed considerably.

We crossed the Willis Avenue Bridge on red carpet and entered the Bronx just shy of mile 20. Just one mile later we returned to Manhattan on the Madison Avenue Bridge. Somewhere in Harlem I caught up with and overtook Sean Combs (a.k.a. P. Diddy) the marathon's big celebrity. If I wasn't going to break 4 hours, the least I could do was beat Mr. Combs!

At this point I was running on fumes just trying to make it the next mile to the green and white balloons that signaled a water station where I could walk for a minute while I gulped down my Poland Springs mineral water. Yvonne was at 96th Street to cheer me on. After admitting to her that I was dying I pushed on into the Park. At mile 24 I had a few choice words for the Queen that I respectfully kept to myself. The last mile is usually my favorite. I like to pull out the stops and finish strong. Unfortunately, I had nothing left and just getting to the finish line was a real bitch.

I crossed the line with an official time of 4h14m35s and a net time of 4h13m03s. I looked up and smiled for the photographers and collected my finisher medal. My primary objective had been achieved! Ok, I thought to myself, I've got this marathon thing out of my system now. If you had asked me, at that moment, if I would do it again I would have responded "NO!" without hesitation or qualification. But the pain is temporary and as I write this narrative it seems that I may have some unfinished business with the 4-hour mark...

In all 34,661 other people finished the race. 26.2 miles is a long way to run. I now have a new perspective and a profound respect for crazy people who run marathons.