

It was a dark and rainy night . . . No, wait, that was 2007, and that was the evening *before* the race. Never mind, I wasn't even here in 2007. Let me start over.

It was a cool and clear spring evening in Cambridge, and I was drifting off to sleep at 8:30pm, setting myself up for 8 hours of mostly solid sleep on an inflatable mattress on a friend's floor before hauling off to the busses for the slog to Hopkinton. Luckily, sleep came easy due to the previous days' red-eye flight and a lot of walking around town, taking in the aroma and flavors of this unique town.

Sunday morning saw the Olympic trials, with over a hundred women in various states of lean emaciation hauling themselves around a loop course crafted for the benefit of their times and the spectators' view. I watched enough to get a feel for their sheer speed, and beat the crowds by heading back into the Expo to get my gait analyzed and do some shopping.

The rest of the day consisted of sheer gluttony as I justified the carbs I was stuffing into my gullet by imagining them going straight to my muscles as glycogen. The most expensive brunch on the planet at Henrietta's, ice cream at Herrell's, chocolate at Burdick's, and even a few protein bars at intervals while shopping. I got pleasantly full but never stuffed, so while it might not have been the best day-before-race strategy I think it was reasonable given the bounty before me.

At 5:30 my alarm went off, with the plan to leave around 6. Last minute gear appropriations and some slow cooking oatmeal later, I got out the door after 6:30 with no worries - the busses kept leaving until 7:30.

I definitely dislike this late start, even if in "my time" it is really 8:30. San Francisco was wonderful with its 5:30am start - you're done right after 9 and have the rest of the day to play! So with 5, then 4, then 3 hours still before my start in Hopkinton, I am carefully eating more lightweight carbs - banana, half a bagel (in my current carb-suspicious years, I had forgotten how wonderfully chewy they are... mmmm), a good pint+ of water, some coffee.

Despite the time window and the coffee, I couldn't get things moving during the 3 times I visited the blue portos, but yet I didn't feel like I needed to, so hopefully all would be ok later on. GI problems are my BANE during races over 3 hours, affecting nearly all ultras as well as my last marathon, which had me doubling over with cramps at mile 23, trying to hold myself together just long enough to finish.

I had been eating several pieces of candied ginger the last few days, and today during the race I planned to eat a bunch more in the first half before switching to Clif Bloks and gel. New strategy, unknown prognosis.

The only other new thing today was socks, but that's a non-issue. I don't even think wearing new shoes is a big deal, with how easily lighter shoes are broken in. Oh, and I used some anti-chafing crap for the first time. Those extra 7# in the last year were just enough to cause some annoying irritations in shorts that are "race length". Grr.

Ok, so I'm standing in line for johns, walking around, snacking, listening to the very entertaining announcer dude, and just not trying to stress too much. My level of nervousness has been on a moderate decline since yesterday morning, when it peaked and I was almost overwhelmed with emotion contemplating the hugeness of it all. I think being around that many people who have so many of their hopes and dreams tied up in this event gets in the air and affects everyone around.... And no, I'm not joking - I mean that literally. Pre-race jittery pheromones aside, it is certainly cool to see how much the town rallies around the marathon.

Finally we head towards the start three quarters of a mile away, and I jog most of it to attempt to warm up - after all, this is a RACE, and I'd like to do alright. I don't quite understand those that don't even try to warm up their muscles before they launch downhill.

Reaching my corral right before our Wave 2 start, I head out, walking towards the pads and the clock, crossing the line under 3 minutes after our 'gun time'. I punch my watch and everyone actually starts running, finally. Right into the first downhill we sail, feeling out our legs with everyone seeming to heed the "don't go out too fast!!!!" mantra, at least for now.

Everyone around me should have done about a 3:40 to get here, so pacing is going to be "easier" than at other marathons, though none of us are likely to leave everyone else in the dust as we are accustomed to doing. My qualifying time will put me somewhere around the top quarter of finishers, time-wise, but in a standard marathon it could be as high as the top 10%. Interestingly, this corral means that I am surrounded by mostly women and some older men and charity runners (just a few of those, though). I see a few that I'll be seeing for the next several hours, and many more that I only see once.

One taller woman has smileys on her calves and she is a good visual, staying just ahead of me, and also a woman in pink with a huge AJ on her front because that's all I hear, "Go AJ!" "Yeah, AJ!" "Run AJ, Run!". I guess the name-on-shirt thing really works at this marathon, though I wonder if for the solo-oriented racer it gets old and even annoying after awhile. Remembering the women's race yesterday I contemplated if the elites even hear the thousands who scream their name, either by recognition or by just reading the name on their bib by rote as they approach.

Generally, I'm feeling pretty good. As in my previous marathon, I did have to remind myself that this is truly a race and I should just keep pushing the boundary of comfort without letting it become a mere hard training run. But that butts up against the fear of going too

fast, so I just keep cruising at a fair clip, seeing the first handful of miles go by in decent times - I hit the first three in around 8:20 pace, which puts me on target for 3:36ish if I speed up just a little like I usually do later in the race.

My PR is 3:38:03 - despite what the results from San Francisco say. I had a "chip incident" that started my clock running nearly 2 minutes before it should have, so while I officially ticked just under 3:40, I don't consider that the time to beat. It's gotta be 3:38. Pipe dream? Still 3:30, but I'd have to have a pretty stellar race.

The sun is really warm and I am very glad I didn't start wearing long sleeves - I would have had to discard the shirt and I happen to like most of my shirts. Just before the start I saw runners slathering on sunscreen and thought it was a strange thing to do at this time of the year, but then again, it is around the noon hour, a time when I rarely if ever do my running.

I am taking Gatorade every other stop or so, and STILL don't have the drinking thing down. I slosh it, I swallow about 1/4 of what's in the cup, I splash it on my feet when I drop the not-emptied vessel on the pavement below my feet and squash it. In this race it is strange to just discard things, but I see so many people out with rakes and brooms that after a few miles I don't give it another thought and toss my gel wrappers down when the time comes, as well. But in the back of my head I still wonder if I was being jerkish by doing that - especially the annoying little top tab from the gel wrapper - those are hard to clean up.

My legs and face have dried Gatorade on them, prompting at least one water stop to kind of wash things off. I miss grabbing a sponge when they are offered at three or four locations, and regret each one.

The calorie plan, insomuch as I have one, is to eat my candied ginger for about the first 8 or 10 miles while drinking Gatorade, then switch to my one 200 calorie pack of Clif Bloks, then get 2 gels at mile 17 - the ONLY gel stop on the course - and take those in the final miles.

Near the end of San Fran I was almost hobbled by GI problems - cramping, nearly bringing me to a walk just to keep my shit together (and unfortunately I mean that literally) - but today things seem a bit more subdued. The ginger can't be doing anything for the lower GI, but then again I have been eating it off and on for a few days now, on top of the massive carb load I ingested Saturday and Sunday. People say there's good ice cream in Boston. I can vouch for that. But back to the race (let me know if you want to know which is the best in town). . .

The next few miles again go by smoothly, and the next few after that. I clock some 8:15s and 8:20s with an 8:10 in for good measure, passing the 10 mile mark shortly thereafter. No one around me is talking, but for brief phrases or comments, and all I can see ahead of me is heads. Hundreds and hundreds of bobbing heads filling the rolling road beyond. This view

does not change the entire time I'm out there - and all the heads I see have the same panorama of their own set of heads in front of them. The scale is amazing.

Finishing a marathon of "normal" size, it wouldn't be uncommon to cross the line by yourself. Granted, there might be someone just behind you, just ahead of you, but still you can cross where it is you and you alone if only for a few seconds. Here that just cannot happen - even in my section of paces we'll be crossing the finish line about a half dozen at a time, and just keep pouring in. By the 5 hour mark, finishers will be one and two at a time but they will still be a constant flow, many running as teams for their charity of choice.

We enter the gauntlet of the Wellesley women, screaming their heads off and begging for hugs and kisses from the runners. I wonder if they would laugh if I flashed them. Is it *that* kind of college? One of the women near me is a student, and as she runs by two of her friends leap out to run with her, both of them wearing fabulous golden sparkly short shorts. The racer only gets the company of one of her friends, unfortunately, for one of the golden duo is grabbed and restrained by a cop, presumably for interfering but mostly it just looked like *he* was interfering with everyone's fun.

The halfway point comes, and with it another dead-even split - more 8:20 miles, followed by the official half-time of 1:49:37, to make the total 13.1 miles of running and over 100 minutes of plodding in the bank. I still see a few people that have been around me - smiley calf woman is nearby, but I think I've lost AJ either ahead or behind me. One or two people ask about my Hardrock shirt (so far my favorite marathon shirt, if for nothing else than a conversation starter), and I quickly reply the two events are so different they can't even be compared. In my rather limited experience, I estimate that the net amount of pain experienced is similar in both marathons and hundred milers, but in a marathon you get it over 1/10th the amount of time so it's a bit . . . sharper.

My half-marathon time is about 2 minutes faster than at San Francisco, which buoys my mood, though not as much if I would have hit it in 3:30 pace (another 5 minutes faster). A gentleman in green passes me, apparently after tailing me for a very long time, and says that my pacing has been great, so I snark back, "what, and you're leaving me, then??" I don't see him again - he slowly gains ground on me from then on.

For a brief bit I am behind an older man wearing a shirt that says #100 marathon and I am duly impressed, whether this is the hundredth, or if he got that shirt many races ago and made it his de facto uniform. Written and duct taped on the back of several others are their inspirations: "running for Jim", "#10 Boston", "Doing it for Mom" are but a few. And just a few times I see a runner near me recognize their family on the side of the road and rush over to say hello and give them sticky salty hugs before pressing on.

The next stretch, is another boringly predictable clump of 8:25s, and we are coming up on 10 miles to go. The road starts rolling its hills just a bit more now, in a gentle tease that will lead up to Heartbreak before mile 21. I'm feeling warm, only slightly energetic, and my quads are starting to hurt. Okay, that's a new thing. Quads are supposed to hurt after the race, limping around the airport on the way home. Not during, and that has me worried about fluids, so I try to get more than just a sip from the next few water stops - even slowing to a walk to make less of a mess. Walking definitely helps, and I catch right back up to anyone that got a lead on me in my absence.

My quads do feel a little strange, not unlike they would if I ever ran during that post-race soreness which is pretty much never. Each step brings a small tremor of discomfort, completely bearable; my only worry is that they'll first get much worse and then they'll just start seizing up or going into actual cramps.

My pace on this stretch unfortunately - yet predictably - slows. From 16 to 21 is a big danger zone - you've picked your pace, you might be not looking at the watch too much because you still feel the same. You're thinking about the final 5 and how well or badly those could end up, so your mind is not on your current speed. Though your body might feel about the same, the distance covered almost certainly means that equal exertion will not produce the same speed as earlier.

We're also in the Newton hills now - rolling up and down, slowly eating away at any reserves that are still remaining for those of us out in the sun. Me and my fellow sunblock-spurning compatriots are acquiring a nice deep pink burn on only the right side of our bodies, which we'll only notice when showering later tonight.

And so went my splits - from a respectable clip of 8:20-ish, I have quintuplet of horrible times: 8:40, 8:46, 8:40, 8:40, 8:49. Ouch. That final one was the mile that included Heartbreak Hill, so all by itself it is not a bad split, but it could have looked 'better' if the preceding miles had been 30 seconds faster. Should I have picked it up more? Yeah, definitely, I tell myself as I write this 2 days removed from the race. There is one thing that could have helped - when I hit my watch to get splits, it only stopped the clock briefly to show my cumulative time rather than the split time. Had I seen those 8:40s rolling by, I do think the fear of PR would have spurred a little action at least.

The crest of the hills sees us through Boston College, and if the women of Wellesley were rowdy, these coeds are vying for the title of screamiest 20 year olds in the city. Men and women with yellow shirts, raising cheering voices even higher when one of their own comes by.

Even with my slowing times, it is in the last 10 miles that I really start to see the damage this course causes in everyone's legs and spirit - rather than holding steady in a crowd, I'm now

passing more than a handful of people, enough that it is noticeable as each one slips away, focus and discomfort on their faces.

Despite that, and as the pain in the quads is steadily increasing but still tolerable, I launch into the final 5 miles in my usual fashion and pick up the pace noticeably as we head into a painful yet welcome downhill that will continue for a few miles. Another pacing buddy has appeared about two miles ago - she's got a red shirt and black spandex shorts on and is a little younger than me, setting a great pace. She's also competitive, because when I tell her this, she speeds away from me for a bit but I keep her in sight and catch her again after a mile or so.

The infamous Citgo sign appears, the apparition that indicates just a few miles remain. We are now in the thick of the city, running through closed off streets, over brick crosswalks, through crowds 5 deep on the sidewalks. I don't look at any of my splits, saddened after realizing that breaking 3:38 is all but impossible by now - I'd have to crank out 3 or 4 7:30s on these barking quads.

The feet are feeling ok in their uber-lightweight racers, just a little pounded upon. No blisters, thanks to new technical socks and little water spilled in that direction. Having a little something left at the end is both uplifting and difficult - passing more and more people as I cruise the streets, it is easy to think I'm moving faster than I am and not push the pace even more, which is certainly in my abilities. It stays steady, however, with each step making those long leg muscles threaten rebellion, and they click by like this for 22-25: 8:05, 8:13, 7:57, 8:01. I could only muster one mile under 8 minutes this race, a small testament to the course.

My red-shirted pacing friend and I run close together until about mile 25, and I pull ahead, hoping she'll respond, even looking back a few times for her. But she has disappeared, and I turn the final right for the last half-mile, the spectators now 20-deep and beyond, howling.

And then, there it is. Left-hand turn on to Boylston and its less than a quarter mile to go, the huge blue arch signalling the destination, though it still comes slowly. Even through this, with quads screaming now but thankfully still under my control, I realize that my Boston is about to be over, and I have the bizarre thought that I wish I had farther to go.

3:39 flat, across the timing pads and then it really *is* over.

Races like this are a stark study in contrasts - preparation, planning, training day after day, the big event, and then in a blink you are just another grimy anonymous finisher with a shiny space blanket, wandering the streets of Boston in a satisfied yet melancholy daze.

Until the next one, that is.