

# 2007 Training for the San Francisco Marathon

from an first time marathoner's perspective

It couldn't have come at a worse time. I was cruising along at week 8 or so of my marathon training agenda, with 9 weeks to go until my race, getting used to running on pavement again for the first time in over 10 years, when it happened.

Perhaps there was a tremor a few days earlier that I ignored or just didn't even think much about. Likely there could have been a sign if I had been paying better attention to exactly what my legs were telling me, but as it was, things seemed to happen rather suddenly.

The routine 14 mile out and back run with a precariously steep incline the final 2 miles to the turnaround was my achilles undoing, all on one run of 150 minutes. Quiet yet noticeable it remained for the first 5 or 6 miles, and hearteningly it then was silent. I hummed a sigh of relief.

Not until after the hill was summited and I was pounding that downhill at 7 minute pace, the pain started to creep up all over again. By the flat stretch that took me home to my car, it increased until crossing side streets - where I had to step down from the curb and then up again onto the pedestrian path - were lodged somewhere between "ouch" and wince-inducing. I counted off the streets that would have to pass before I was done: Paseo del Norte, San Bernadino, San Rafael, Academy.... Spain.... Manitoba.... and finally my remarkably fresh legs deposited me at the end.

Depression set in over the next week as I bravely set about finding the very best treatment options, mostly involving stretching and strengthening, and tried a few short runs on my gravel road. Each ended about a mile after beginning, with frustration and pain.

My mileage, of course, plummeted, and as I tried to work back up towards my plan, I realized that running Steamboat on June 3 would not happen. Diligently sticking to the strengthening exercises, I only ran when no pain appeared, and took a full 5 long weeks to arrive at the place I left off - my first very long training run of 20 miles. By then I was really ready and had chosen the backup race: San Francisco, on July 29, a long 9 weeks away.

Those weeks passed without further incident and I logged 4 runs over 20 miles, a perfect build-up for the low mileage runner like myself: my highest week was 48 miles, but generally I was close to 40 - not very high for your "average" marathon training plan. The weeks before the race I grew increasingly excited to visit a city I hadn't seen in awhile as well as spend time with an old friend who had moved back to the Bay area. I tried to have a calm digestive system by eating easy and mild foods for many days - [low-residue](#) is the key phrase here - before the race, and headed to the airport on Friday, the 27th in high spirits and packing 2 pairs of potential race shoes.

Because I left for the race on Friday, I would have lots of time to sight-see and relax with my friend John, a bay area resident and fellow foodie. My stop-over on the way was to be

Denver, a city that I like but would never call home. For that reason I think the city wants to grab me whenever it can - my flight leaving Albuquerque was delayed, first for 30 minutes, then an hour . . . then 90 minutes, on the flimsy construct that our connecting flight would somehow wait for us - ha! Arriving in Denver way too late for the last overbooked flight of the day, I found myself facing a night in the airport, an \$80 crappy motel stay, or, the favor of a friend. A bus ride, comfortable bed, and 8 hours later, I was awake and having coffee with my generous hosts, who coincidentally needed to go back to the airport for their own trip that very morning.

At the sprawling facility yet again, I waited in line with the other oblivious SFO passengers, watching a group of teenagers speed-solving Rubik's cubes, ready to get on with my weekend.

Screeching into the short window of time I had left, I arrived, collected bags, hopped into the Miata and peeled away to visit the expo and pick up my race junk. I made a cursory tour through the retail booths, and paid a quick compliment to the "flaunt it" owners of Running Divas before diving out fast enough to not drop any cash on apparel I truly did not need, even if the slogans kick butt.

Priority #2 was more clean food into my gullet, and we headed back to San Mateo for my first [omakase](#) meal, 14 pieces of near-perfect nigiri including a piece of Copper River salmon that was like buttah. Raw fish and rice - what could be more satisfyingly low residue than that?

No alcohol, and an early evening putting together my outfit and shoes, and listening to the Beatles' Revolver on the stereo. No, I'd never heard it before, so now my cultural intelligence is one micro-step higher.

Like a true gentleman, my host insisted that I not drop big bucks on a cab at 3:30 in the morning just to not wake him, so he drove me to the start, a satisfying chill in the air and a huge full moon just about to set into the gathering fog.

I had eaten some bread but no coffee, which might have helped with my morning constitutional activities, so even though I successfully located facilities with running water I was not able to release enough of my pent-up nerves into the sewer system.

My brand-spanking new race shoes are feeling great, and I'm glad I went with these instead of a more minimalistic alternative. I had been torn between the insanely light feel of the Asics Hyperspeed 2 and the relatively light but still cush ride of the Fila Corsa Ottos. My decision was wise to continue believing the Asics were insanely light - the Filas were perfect, and even in my favorite color - red, to match my race number.

Wave 3 is my start group, and this is my first race with waves at all - I am completely naïve about how it all works. My post-race bag is deposited, and I jog around to warm up a little, heading back to the start just after Wave 2 has left. It will be three minutes until my start, so I move towards the line with my group, and as they near it, they start jogging. Hmm, that's strange, but, hey, I'll go with it. As I cross the line my chip makes the pad beep and I continue with the people who are now running. I suppose they just have fluid times on the wave starts, or something.

But then.... I look around and see that everyone around me has Wave 2 bibs on. Uh-oh. They are the last of Wave 2, not the beginning of Wave 3 after all! Now, completely freaked out, I think that I need to go back and start with my own group, so backtrack is what I do, making the pad beep yet again as I cross it going the wrong way.

As my group officially starts on time, I am propelled forward to cross the pad for the third time, and try to squelch the voices in my head that say "you just ruined your race!". I hope that my chip will be reset by someone smart enough to see what happened and I won't be disqualified. When I get my Boston qualifying time I need it to count - and besides, DQing is just embarrassing.

So anyway, I lumber on, trying not to think about it too much. The air is wet and cool and still only a faint hint of daybreak is on the horizon. My strategy is similar to that of my preparatory long runs: go out easy, keep picking up the effort and hope the pace comes down in tandem, and then just hang on for the last few miles.

The longest training run I had done was about 22 miles - on that day I decided to go out for the same amount of time that the race would take and see how much ground I could cover at the relaxed pace of the long run. Four miles short is not too bad, but I would still need to focus when the race came along, and drink, drink, drink.

Oh yeah, I have a drinking problem. When it comes to running, my typical behavior is to deny thirst or the need for fluids, a survivable strategy when the run length is around 2 hours or less. However, it is not an optimum tactic at any distance, and practically guarantees a crash and burn at the marathon event.

So those long runs I tried to drink more than I wanted to, still knowing it wasn't enough. I even started taking gel packets and gummy blocks to get some calories in for those dried-up muscles.

Marathon day I had a stash of 600 calories' worth of Clif Bloks in my water bottle - the perfect storage location considering my shorts had no pockets. I carried no water, and would drink from every aid station to keep my fluids topped off. That goal was met, save just a few water stops along the way, yet it was not nearly enough.

Once the race was underway, we cruised up the street towards the northern edge of the shore where the Golden Gate touches down - our most significant climb during the race, and it would be done on fresh legs, twice over. I briefly saw the 3:30 pace group go by me and considered taking off to stick with them, but bravely thought to myself, "I'll see ya'll later..." As I found out after the race, they had actually started late and were hustling to get back on pace, so sticking with them might not have helped my legs so early in the journey.

The first mile passed in 8:22, a perfect pace to begin, and the next two averaged 8:32 (with some hills around Fort Mason likely slowing my 3rd mile) and then 8:19 for miles 4 and 5. I was hitting my watch whenever I saw a mile marker, but apparently the button is a hard push, as I only captured a total of 18 splits, so some of the miles' paces had to be averaged.

Up and over the bridge it was COLD - not freezing, but certainly chilly and rather wet with the heavy mist clinging to the air. We started to see the leaders come back across by the time we got to mid-way, and everyone cheered for them, like the friendly bunch of runners we are. Soon enough we'd be the ones in their place finishing our out & back, with the hordes behind having to cheer for us as they made their way across for the first time.

We reached the lookout point on the other side and did a do-si-do around a rest area, stopping for water and gels. I worried about my 600 calories - would it be enough? To ensure against running out, I took 2 race-supplied gels along the course and eagerly sucked them down, even if the orange flavor was cloyingly sweet. My stomach has yet to rebel violently from trying new things during a race, and this day was no exception - the gels worked just fine.

As we flew down the other side of the bridge past the rest of the field it was already 9 miles into the race. So far already and I hoped I was eating and drinking enough - it seemed like I was inhaling buckets of water from the thick air. My sunglasses, unnecessary and a bit silly, were perched over my eyes anyway, picking up dots from the drying mist but protecting me slightly from the wind the whistled over the open shore.

I assessed my legs as we passed mile 10 and faced some steep climbs before getting into Golden Gate park. The miles 6-10, including both bridge crossings, had averaged 8:35. Feeling good, just a little bit of soreness from pushing up that last hill, but generally.... Ok. Should I push harder? Those last 5 miles were an unacceptable pace for my primary goal of under 3:40, and way off the mark if I wanted to get 3:30. I felt like I was on a long training run, putting out a good effort but not really "racing".

Again I hoped I wouldn't be disqualified after all of this... and then pushed the thought away and cruised through the next two miles in 8:12 pace. Much better. We started seeing the crowds of half-marathoners now, waiting for their start at the halfway mark, and the first half group (who started with us) was about to finish, as they were diverted from our path at 12 miles.

Through city streets on ups and downs, my next mile was 8:24, but after passing the half-way point I rallied and the 14th mile was 7:55, finally under 8. An 8-minute pace is exactly the 3:30 pace I sought, and to attain it I'd have to go a LOT faster over the second half. It was theoretically possible, as the hills are supposed to be much less severe later in the course, but looking less likely as each mile clicked by.

The Golden Gate Park was fantastic, weaving around on pavement paths, past manned boomboxes playing hyperactive tunes to bolster our spirits. One song that I hadn't heard before but still sticks in my head had a cheerleader-like rallying chorus of "this shit is bananas... b-a-n-a-n-a-s!". I had to grin hearing those words, and thank the person who chose that song over something like Chariots of Fire. Barf.

8:39, 8:31, 8:34 - those were miles 15, 16, and 17. Okay, so the Gwen Stefani "bananas" song didn't give me as much of a boost as I thought. Pete Pfitzinger says that "slowing during this portion of the marathon is often more a matter of not concentrating than of not being able to physically maintain the pace." And boy, was I not concentrating.

Can I blame my watch? No? Oh, drat. I did only take 18 splits during the race, but those that did manage to get recorded were mostly for posterity - I could not read my watch face! Chalk it up to sheer newbiness with my shiny fresh Nike sunglasses and their polarization, [rendering the face of LCDs black](#). Is it any wonder that polarized glasses are sold to fishermen and mountaineers who are shown trekking through the wilderness with an analog watch?

Ok, and this course is just a hair deceptive - you're cruising along and making good time, and then some 10% hill throws itself at you for 75 yards and your pace falters. On many of the uphills I was passed, but I did the passing on the downs - my quads are indestructible after years of mountain trails so I had no fear of blasting down without the brakes engaged.

Our final few miles twisting around the park got me through in 8:15 pace, better again, and I got some cheers and smiles when the next music stop was playing YMCA and I did all of the dance moves with a grin on my face. Perhaps they thought I was having too much fun, considering I had been running for 2 and a half hours already.

I saw a woman close to my age and began working on her, closing the distance little by little. She would get delayed a few times by friends who were giving her support and aid along the way, but I admired her spirit - she would throw her arms in the air to greet them and looked like she was having a blast.

We launched out into the city streets again, headed straight (ha!) down Haight Street, with the motorcycle gang crossing guards out in full force to hold back the early morning traffic. Yes, it's true - the San Francisco Marathon recruited tough biker dudes to be the traffic control volunteers, and it was a welcome if amusing sight.

True to a hipster neighborhood, there was little sign of activity at this frighteningly early hour of 8 am. A few corners held spectators by the half-dozen, which I appreciate after ultras where not a soul would be seen for hours, and they cheered with all the enthusiasm they could muster out of their hung-over bodies.

More hills than I anticipated dotted this stretch, and I was finally beginning to feel my legs. Drinking about a half-cup of water at 8 stops along the way was almost certainly not enough, but I kept eating my bloks and hoping for the energy they promised. One timing pad was crossed at around mile 20, and my chip didn't make it beep so again came my worry. I asked a guy next to me if his had beeped on the pad and he said "no", so I breathed with relief.

The fear of my own pace was getting to me and I nailed miles 20 & 21 in 7:55, and 22 was 8:16. My average was coming down, but I hoped it would come down enough by the end to even meet my original goal of a Boston Qualifying time.

I started cramping around mile 22 - not in the legs, but rather in the gut, the worst place. I eyed the port-a-potties and wondered how long it would take to stop and if the stop would even be "productive", to not mince words. This type of problem has affected me before, and often relief is only temporary before the discomfort swells again.

Some final hills to cross before reaching the waterfront again at mile 24, and I hurried with two 8:04 miles added to the tally. Once I nearly lurched in pain and had to walk for just a few steps to regain composure, but this far along I had not many options - it was push on and just keep things together.

Somewhere around here I passed my cheerful peer and hoped she would stick with me and give us both a good run and sprint for the finish. "Come on, girl", I thought, "Let's take this pace up a bit and make a show of it..."

Another runner from Denver came by and commented on my Hardrock shirt - was my choice too much of a 'statement' at this race? Yes, Hardrock is tough, but it is really a different kind of tough - different pain, different adversaries, different everything. A marathon is taking your toe and slamming it in a door, and 100 milers are grasping a big set of pliers and slowly squeezing that toe, harder, harder.....

Self-inflicted pain was on my mind as I peeled through mile 25 in 8:21, obviously feeling a little more complaining from my body which wasn't ready to sprint yet and feeling the effects of the last 3 and a half hours.

This certainly hurt worse than any of my long runs, but it did not yet match the exquisite pain that greets me at the end of 5K races. I pushed, and pushed harder, waiting to see that 26 mile marker to announce the final 385 yards. 7:55 to meet that last marker, and now I really did try to sprint.

Who sprints at the end of a marathon? Those who have too much left - and there wasn't much in me, so my sprint was much more like a "statistically significant increase in pace" than anything photo-worthy or spectacular. I now saw the clock, and was having a hard time with the math - it had started with Wave 1, 5 minutes before me, so I just plowed on with whatever I had left.

The burn - the burn! It took over my legs and they propelled me forward, not quite stumbling, as I churned across the pad, clicking my watch and stopping my own internal clock, even if the race clock and its officials still might possibly betray me on this day. I must have looked a little zonked as one finish-line volunteer asked if I needed help but I declined, headed towards the throng of other finishers piling up to exit the area.

A medal was placed around my neck, and a space blanket put on my shoulders, now that the chill was coming on. John found me rather quickly and also provided a fast detour to get me to my real finish line - a tall blue booth, hopefully well stocked.

Once that was marvelously over, we contemplated walking through the 'finishers' march of free junk', wherein I would be plied with miniature bottles of Odwalla, energy bars, et cetera. We had a lunch date in just a few hours, so I only found a lone vendor giving away some kind of smoothie, chugged that down, and we staggered off to the car.

**3:59:54** That's what the San Francisco Marathon clocked me at, a time good enough by one minute to get me to Boston. Seeing my name on the results was a welcome relief, as well as the time that I needed printed out in black and white.

*3:38:08* That's my real time, on my watch, still not even cleared from memory. I had started a full 1 minute and 46 seconds too early, and what happened with my chip is that my official race clock simply started ticking that first time I crossed the start line. Had I been more savvy, I should have just kept going with that group and nothing onerous would have happened, but as it finally played out, things were perfectly acceptable.

Acceptable. Hmm. Hrmph.

I asked a friend afterwards if they ever felt like they could have done just a bit better after they had finished their marathons and she hesitated but a fraction of a second before saying, "every single one."

It makes sense, for certainly there were lots of things I can improve upon. First and foremost being able to track my darn splits, but also drink more, eat more, and just relax a little more before the race starts - have some coffee, get loosened up, that sort of thing.

Now I crack open Pfitzinger again and look at those plans for staggering races and how to train in-between. After all, there's a [local one coming up](#) in late October already....

