

Marathon # 20-Mardi Gras Marathon  
Galveston, TX  
February 5, 2012  
David Jones

He wore running shorts. He had a marathoner's build. But man!—he also had this strange and aloof countenance about him. His dark scraggly beard was a good foot in length, and he was conspicuously standing alone on a raised platform next to the starting chute. Given the weather conditions, I began to suspect his name might be Noah. It had been raining nonstop since midnight. The streets were soaked and puddled. The forecast called for more rain all day.

The showers did temporarily abate about 15 minutes before the gun. The rain doesn't bother me, and I actually appreciate the cooling it provides. I was concerned about the two negative consequences—waterlogged shoes and wind. The general rule is each ounce of shoe weight adds about a minute to a marathon final time. I figured my shoes would soak up about a quarter to a third of a pound.

Then there was the wind. About 50 percent of the two-looped course runs along the Galveston seawall, with very little infrastructure to block the blowing 20+ mph north wind. Another 25 percent is along a beach access road where the gusts can really add resistance against your stride.

About five minutes to gun, I removed my sweat top and stood shirtless about ten feet behind the start. I heard a couple of runners derisively chuckle behind me, as many runners were wearing full winter gear (beanies, gloves, etc.). However, the temperature was only 55 degrees, which was cool in the direct wind, but not really cold. Additionally, waterlogged shoes would be enough; I didn't also need a soaked shirt, hat, and gloves.

Two minutes to gun, an affable-looking younger runner to my left congenially asked, "What time are you goin' for?" I slowly tilted my head left to right a couple of times to communicate a fleeting confidence, "Well, I would like 3:10, but given the weather, I'm think'n something probably around 3:15." I figured he was looking for someone to pace with so I reciprocated, "How 'bout you?" When he nonchalantly said, "2:45," admiringly I responded, "Wow! Well, that should be enough to win." He then humbly and encouragingly said, "Well, you never know who's gonna show up. Anyway, you're really just running against yourself."

The gun fired and we were off. A dozen half-marathoners took the lead, pulling me along. After a quarter mile, we turned left and headed due east to the seawall. About a half mile later, a group of five or six behind me slowly started to pass. Their leader was the official 3:00 pacer, but his pack was all half-marathoners shooting for 1:30. Relative to my stride, their pace intensity seemed to be just nominally faster, so I tagged along. Just before reaching the seawall, I saw my longtime friend and running buddy John.

He had driven down from North Houston with his daughter Caitlyn to give me a two-person cheering section, which is two people more than all the other spectators along the course this day. The bad weather, combined with Super Bowl Sunday, was enough to keep all sane people indoors. Even if a marathon is very well organized with great volunteer support, many runners will rate it badly if there isn't a large spectator turnout. I feel the opposite; sure, crowd support is nice in dispersed pockets, but constant yelling is distracting, especially when it's the jeering, "You're almost there!" every half mile. I prefer to zone out and STHUAJR (see previous race report, or text John for advice).

Proudly wearing his A & M sweat top and holding an umbrella in one hand, John stretched forward with the other to give me five and called out, "You lucked out on the temperature." Reaching the seawall, I turned due south with the 3:00 pack, pushed along with the wind at our backs. Again, their pace was just a nick quicker than my natural stride, but I had to let them pull away. It wasn't the marginal effort, but the duration. It's analogous to picking up a light two- or three-pound weight and holding it out at arm's length. Initially it would take just a minimal effort, but keeping it there for three solid hours would be a Herculean task.

At mile four we turned right to make the one-mile square loop through a residential neighborhood before starting the six-mile upwind section along the seawall. Except for passing (or being passed) by the occasional half-marathoner, I was now completely alone. I settled into a rhythmic stride, leaned back, gazed up high above the horizon, and zoned out.

About ten minutes later, the course turned due north and the real work began. I would prefer to run uphill than against the wind. At least a long hill climb is a constant resistance. With frequent and unpredictable gusts of a strong wind, often from slightly different angles, you are also swayed a bit off-center. It's just enough to affect your striding rhythm, whether it's from upwind, crosswind, or even downwind gusts.

Passing the same point as mile one (but now mile five in the opposite direction), John called out from the other side of the street, "You're in ninth!" Ninth was the overall position that I finished in this event last year, and I squeaked in with a third-place award in my age division. Today, however, by the time I reached the beach access section at mile seven, though physically feeling good, mentally I was ready to fall into a warm cushy bed.

My shoes and socks were soaked through, and the strong wind now had little drops of rain beating against my face and body. Then a total shock—the 3:10 pacer pulled up to my side, and it was Noah! He only had one runner with him, for whom Noah was graciously blocking the wind. Given his motif, I thought he would be leading two runners, one male and one female. Since he already had the male, and Texas doesn't recognize civil unions, I let them go.

Finishing the first lap, I was curious to see my time. I had yet to look at my wristwatch. Fortunately, my 1:36 split was about what I had figured, and I firmly believed I could hold the pace another lap. Now that the faster half-marathoners were finished, I was really running solo. There wasn't another runner within a quarter mile of me.

Headed due east toward the seawall for a second time, I again saw John. However, this time he was running toward me excitedly calling out, "Come on! Come on! The 3:10 pacer is right in front of you—you can catch him! Come on! You're in seventh overall!" John ran next to me for 50 yards encouraging me to pick it up. Aerobically I felt great, but said, "Hey, I feel good, but the wind—Man, the wind is bad."

From mile 14 to 16, I tried to appreciate the two-mile downwind push before having to fight the six-mile upwind stretch to the beach for a second time. That's when I saw that affable youngster (well, early 30s). He was all alone in the lead, with literally not another runner within a mile. Passing in the opposite direction, I yelled out, "Yeah, buddy, looking good!" He went on to win in a 2:46, a full 20 minutes ahead of second place.

Reaching mile 18, John, who was now faithfully standing in a steady drizzle with Caitlyn at his side, yelled out, "Fifth! You're in fifth overall." That was a surprise since I had no recollection of passing any other runners. At mile 19, John and Caitlyn pulled up alongside in his car with the window down a bit, but not enough for me to jump through. He yelled, "Hey, that long-bearded guy dropped out!" That was encouraging as I knew it meant the rain was probably about to stop. I increased my arm swing and lengthened my stride.

I really felt that I was holding a 3:12 to 3:13 pace and felt good; in actuality, I had slowed down by 20 seconds a mile. It was just that most of the other runners had slowed as well. Later at the post-race event, most runners agreed that the upwind section was hard the first time, but just too much the second.

At mile 22, my waterlogged shoes took effect. My quads were burning not only from the extra weight, but the hard heel strikes. Normally, a shoe's air-filled foam provides a springy cushion with each stride, but as liquids are non-compressible, each shoe strike forward felt like running with wood blocks strapped to my feet.

Then at mile 24, another shock—a competitor came up from behind. I had been running solo for about an hour and almost forgot I was in a race. My legs were hurting too much to challenge him. "Go get 'em! Finish strong!" I encouraged. Then again at mile 25, another runner caught me. I could tell he was about ten years younger and not in my age division, so I decided to let him pass unchallenged. However, when he pulled about 25 yards ahead of me, he slowed his pace a nick. With a half mile remaining, I made a move to catch him. My quads were really burning, but I closed the gap to about ten yards. He then made his move and pulled away.

I crossed the finish in 3:19:05, placing seventh overall out of 156 full-marathon finishers, and second in my age division.

I e-mailed the race director the next day, "In spite of the weather, another great race! You guys put on a high-quality event. Great organization, great volunteer support, and great little post-race gathering."

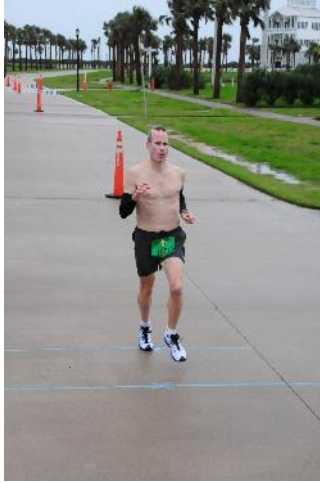
They really do a fantastic job. There's a heap of free pizza, breakfast tacos, sweets, and drinks. The awards are large, quality-made plaques. Packet pickup is a snap at the local running store. The course is pancake flat and



fast. 3:19 is not my fastest, but in those weather conditions, solid.

I don't know why more runners don't do the full marathon. My guess is the Galveston Marathon is only two to three weeks after Houston and two to three weeks before Austin. Most probably only do the half as a pre-Austin final workout or a post-Houston new cycle run.

Great day! Loved it, and will sign up again next year. Special thanks to John and Caitlyn for the support! About 1,200 Runners Total (Full and Half Marathon)



By mile 10, I almost forgot I was in a race.  
Post-race—A bit happier after downing 11 bean & cheese  
breakfast tacos and half a pizza.

