

Marathon #18-San Antonio Rock -n- Roll
November 13th, 2011
By David Jones

Frustrating, Frustrating, Frustrating! I was in top form, having set a half-marathon personal record (PR) just two weeks earlier. This race morning, as I lined up with thirty thousand competitors, three of the four race variables were perfect.

I was the lightest that I've ever been. In the previous weeks, four friends told me, "You look like crap," three workmates said, "You look like you've been sick," and two strangers actually and non-sardonically asked, "Has anyone ever told you that you look like Steve Jobs?" You know you are ready to post a PR when non-runners say that you look like you are on your deathbed.

The course was flat and fast; last year I set a PR in this race. Also, the start has seeded corrals which prevent you from getting boxed in by the less earnest participants standing at the front, often dressed in tutus, tuxedos, or one time, all five Fruit of the Loom Guys; I was actually beaten in my second marathon by the Banana.

Third, I had a complete and strong training cycle. All three of my 20-mile-long runs were at a comfortable and strong pace. Over the last two years I had strayed from some LT runs and forsaken all my VOMax speed intervals. This cycle I was faithful to all my speed work.

But the fourth variable, the weather, was awful. For me, the weather supersedes all other race day factors. Last year when I ran my PR at this race, my weight was only fair and I did a very light training cycle. Both those weaknesses were offset by good weather, with a gun time temperature of 55, a north wind, and cloudy skies.

Today everything else was perfect except the weather. At 7:30 am it was already 68 degrees, with wind out of the south and high humidity. The forecast high was to be 86 degrees. Three days earlier, race officials sent an auto e-mail: "A Message from the Medical Team--Warm Weather Running Tips for Sunday: #1-Don't Push Yourself."

I had run in these conditions once before, the infamous 2007 Chicago Marathon; that day two thousand participants entered the race medical tents, four hundred required hospital trips, and one died. After dropping out at mile 14, I e-mailed a running buddy the following oath: "I'll go on record here and state that I will never start another marathon when the temperature is forecast above 80 degrees. Not only is a PR impossible, running can be dangerous."

Over the years I abrogated that pledge. After months of training and sacrifice, it's impossible to walk out of your hotel a minute from a start line and then not run. Rather, I modified my pledge to never race for a PR in dangerous weather conditions. There is no chance, so why risk serious consequences. No, this day the clearly sagacious strategy was to treat this race as a long training run at a relaxed pace and try to set a PR in my next marathon scheduled for New Year's morning.

However, the paradox is that if marathon runners were the type to choose wisely over choosing purposefully, they would never choose to start running marathons. Teddy Roosevelt's 1905 Paris speech expresses the pursuit of purpose: "[I]f he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."

The gun fired and I went out to set a PR.

My stride felt light and the pace steady; however, carrying a hand-held water bottle was awkward. I filled it to the brim with ice water knowing I would need the extra hydration this day, but the extra two pounds affected my natural arm swing and running rhythm.

I passed the two mile-mark in 14 minutes flat, 30 seconds ahead of a PR pace. Way, way too fast, I eased back. At mile four I was still 30 seconds ahead; my pace was now steady. The next few miles became more difficult. The first seven miles snake through downtown, and the buildings completely block the wind. I was sweat covered by mile six and now only 15 seconds ahead of a PR pace.

The course eventually made its way out toward the Missions at mile seven. The sky was very overcast, the course was open enough to catch some wind, and my breathing improved. Approaching the mile nine marker, I could see a race clock overhead and to the right. I looked down and to the left. At this point, time was irrelevant. I was running the strongest pace I could hold given the bad weather conditions; seeing my time was not going to change my effort, as it was all the effort I had.

Again at the mile 11 marker's clock, I looked down and to the left. I could feel that I had slowed a nick or two. I was intent to run through the halfway mark without noting a time, but I saw the clock when trying to get vertical to improve my form, 1:37:20, a full two minutes behind my PR pace. A PR was now out; from this point forward it would be just for pride.

The overcast sky began to clear at mile 14. By 16 there wasn't a cloud above. I knew dehydration was coming soon; this was going to hurt. At mile 18, we looped a little park area around Mission Juan Capistrano. This section contains a few small hills. Halfway up an incline at 19.5, my heart rate skyrocketed. I was

dehydrated and my breathing became labored. I had to walk for 30 seconds to get my pulse and breathing under control.

When I reached mile 20, I knew I was done. I slowed and walked through the water tables, resigned to just somehow finish. That's when a man dressed in military fatigues said to me, "One hundred—one hundred." He then called out loudly, "Here's our one hundredth marathoner!" to cheers from all the volunteers manning the water station. I replied loudly, "Crap! I guess I gotta try now."

For the next three miles, three other runners and I did a do-si-do. I'd run for a quarter or half mile at a solid and strong pace and then have to stop and walk for 50 yards to get my heart rate down. That's when one or two runners would go by and I would encourage, "You're looking good boys--go get 'em!"

Then they would stop about 50 yards in front of me and start to walk. As I went by they would reciprocate, "Yeah, you got it." This synergistic push continued until mile 23 when I checked my watch for the first time. I was on a 3:27 pace, about a minute behind my Boston qualifying (BQ) time. It didn't matter; there was no way I was going to make up a full minute in the last three miles. My dehydration was causing tight shoulder, chest, and abdominal cramps.

Running around a bend at mile 24, I converged on two thousand walking half-marathoners on the left side of the divided course. My best motivation comes from motivating other runners. I called out, "Yeah, way to go half-marathoners. Just two more miles--let's go, let's go--come on!" No response, only a few belligerent snarls of disdain.

Now completing a half-marathon is laudatory, regardless of time. However, to be casually walking joined four wide, with little or no sign of perspiration, as you discuss the latest Dancing with the Stars episode just grossly violates the spirit of the event.

I held my stride as I ran by and about a quarter mile later tried a different tack. I took off my cap and yelled out, "Come on halfers! Don't let a half-bald 45-year-old accountant lap you. Finish strong!" Again nothing--just a couple eye rolls of derision. Well, I tried.

At mile 25, I checked my watch. I possibly could, just maybe and with total effort, run my Boston qualifying time. However, I also knew it was going to hurt. The longest incline of the course is at mile 25.5, about 100 yards of a moderate slope.

I went into a full stride, most concerned about my heart rate. When I reached the incline's base, I was briefly tempted to give it up, but I had given it my all to this point. I strode up with what I had left. I reached the top and turned for the 100-yard final stretch to the finish line. A last look at my watch showed I had 25 seconds left to BQ.

I took two deep breaths and ran as close to a sprint as I could muster. With fifty yards remaining, I could see the clock, but couldn't make out the numbers. Finally within 10 yards, I saw only three seconds remained to BQ.

I crossed the finish in 3:25:58, placing 81st out of 4,040 full-marathon finishers and squeaking out a Boston qualifier with one second to spare.

I stumbled three steps to the left and horizontally leaned myself over a guard barrier for support. Two volunteers could see I was in immediate need of hydration, and each handed me a water bottle. But my stomach was so nauseous and my breathing so irregular I just couldn't drink.

After several minutes I was able to stand again and began searching for a medical tent, just to be safe. After walking about 50 yards, I became very light headed. I knelt to one knee and just stared at the ground for five minutes. Eventually I sipped a full water bottle and started to regain my bearings. After 15 minutes more, I felt recovered and started the one mile walk returning to my hotel.

Overall, I was thrilled with my effort and pleasantly surprised with my placing in the top one hundred. However, I will go on record here and say I was very stupid. I seriously risked heatstroke for an unnecessary and inconsequential self-imposed challenge. It was foolish.

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