

B2B Challenge

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2 marathons, 2 coasts, 13 days.

When I ran the Big Sur International Marathon last year I wore the bright yellow Boston shirt from the previous year. During the race runners asked if I had just run Boston, which I confessed to bypassing to do this BSIM. Then they'd mention how nice the Boston weather was when they ran it and they'd continue on their way. Wow! 2 marathons, 2 coasts, in 6 days and many were passing me! Now that was impressive. When I finished, one of my slowest in years (3:58), the struggle of running the last miles and the post race crash convinced me that the B2B was not for me.

When it was announced that the BSIM would be *13 days* after Boston in 2011, I gave it a thought, just a little one. In September I bid vacation for that week *just in case*. During club runs that fall Dan Minzner and I talked it up. I signed up for Boston hoping to run it with my Florida running buddy, when he didn't make it through the Boston registration debacle, I decided I needed the challenge and it was a now or never sort of thing and signed up for the B2B. No real logic to that decision, but it was done: 2 marathons, 2 coasts, 13 days were on the schedule. Dan quickly followed suit and got in the day *after* it filled.

Both races would be *bing, bang*: arrive the day before, sleep, get up, run, come back the morning after. I wasn't sure how to handle 2 tough marathons, but I figured I had a built in excuses for each or both. One could be a warm up and the other a recovery run if either or both got ugly. I didn't have a real plan other than to to run them and see what happens. Boston went pretty well, although with the perfect weather forecast I was hoping for a perfect race. That didn't happen but it was my best Boston (3:39): 8 minute miles until the hills of Newton and only 1 mile (Heartbreak Hill, of course) over 9 minutes and I didn't trip, fall or flop around much afterward. A good run by my standards.

The recovery from Boston wasn't too bad, by the second week I was feeling OK. My main concern was dealing with the "Beast." Not Bruce or the leg of the R2C, but the Beast as mentioned in Christopher McDougall's "Born To Run." It's the malevolent voice that creeps into your head during races and tells you that you're a wimp, that you should stop, and that you're more suited to playing Scrabble than being out with real runners. Since a PR on this course was out of the question and another BQ unlikely, I was running this race for the "experience," as is recommended for Big Sur, not a real time goal. That is an open invitation to have the Beast put on a headbanger party in your skull. I've only done a few "run for the experience" races and the Beast has had its way with me. Last year's BSIM for one.

On Saturday Dan and I took the early flight out of Newark to San Francisco, drove a rental car to Monterrey, and by 11am (PDT) we were at the Expo. After a quick drive of the course: what views, what hills! (more than I remembered) we checked into the hotel, then found a great Italian restaurant, and went to sleep on east coast time for an early get up. I typically wake and check the clock often when getting up earlier than normal. The clock display disappeared sometime during the night and I hoped it was a design feature. But no, it was a power outage which would mean NO COFFEE! We all have prerace rituals, and for me starting off with a cup of joe was essential. Dan and I stumbled around trying to get race ready with only the eerie glow of our laptops for light. This day was not starting well. No coffee was not an option, so I drove around the lightless and silent streets of Pacific Grove until I found a 7-11 with power and coffee! And now there was hope that this could be a *regular* race day after all!

Once again the weather was about as perfect as you can get for running: a chilly mid-40's with a nice tailwind, for the start anyway. The first miles were great as we soaked in the scenery, chatted runners from all over, were entertained by jazz, folk, rock bands, Taiko drummers, and classical tunes from a grand piano. I announced to nearby runners, that I must be an insane runner while pointing out the too fast splits on my Garmin. (Definition of insanity: repeatedly doing the same thing while expecting a different result.) In my defense I did the first half a minute slower (1:46) than Boston and there was a tailwind, but I wasn't supposed be seeing the balloons of the 3:30 pace group! Soon after the half way mark the spring in my step sprung, nothing serious, but it didn't bode well for up the road, literally. Around mile 18 the 3:40 group slid by, and the Beast began humming. Good thing this course is so scenic because it is very demoralizing seeing yet another wickedly canted hill stretching out ahead of an endless procession of shuffling runners. Scan the Pacific for a sounding whale, a passing ship, waves, anything but focus on another hill.

I had mentioned to Dan on *occasion* that since the course was modified to an out and back due to the Pacific Coast Highway collapsing he wasn't running the real Big Sur. No 550' hill at Hurricane Point, no Bixby Bridge, where was the challenge? I never read the pre-race literature and didn't discover until we were actually running that the new course had 700 more feet of elevation, 2400' vs 1700', than the original course. So Dan did get the last laugh as not only did we have to do the 13 hills of the Carmel Highlands twice, 2 miles from the finish they cruelly added a detour through Point Lobos Park. That, of course, had hills also. They said it was a scenic park. After mile 22 does anyone see scenery? By then my vision is firmly locked on road about 10 feet ahead and that's all I saw, asphalt and passing butts. I've wondered why Susan and I travel to scenic locals to run when the pavement everywhere looks the same!

With another B goal (staying under 4 hours) pretty much assured I managed an inglorious finish with the Beast howling in my head. I shuffled and even joined the carnage along the side of the road, as I walked parts of the later hills. I somehow managed to finish 5 minutes faster than last year (3:53). It was an ugly finish and Dan (he had already recovered after his 3:36 finish and was swapping war stories with other B2B'ers) will attest that I didn't look too good either when I finally staggered into our B2B finisher's tent. After a bit I managed to hobble over and pick up the B2B medal and our special finisher's jacket and all was good.

Summing up the B2B experience, if you get the opportunity, do it! Big Sur is all it's put up to be, one of the most scenic, best organized marathons anywhere and makes a great vacation destination. I don't think running 2 marathons so soon was that much a factor since my finish last year was worse and on an *easier* course (blame it on the Beast, the hills, going out too fast, and not getting younger.) While it's not cheap, the swag is great: 2 long sleeve tech shirts, 2 finisher's medals, *the B2B jacket*, a post race tent with food, free beer, and an entry to the post race dinner party. And you get to run 2 marathons on 2 coasts in 13 days!