

Why I'll Miss the Boston Marathon

This will not be a race report containing each of my mile splits for the 2011 Boston Marathon. I have them, but I'll keep them to myself, thank you very much. The race result was not what I was hoping for – not by a long shot, and I really have been having a hard time getting motivated to write any sort of report at all. I figured the best strategy was to just wait a few days, and hopefully I would be inspired to write a report based on an obvious theme that crystallized as time passed by. It hasn't happened, so I'll just start rambling.

I trained as hard as I ever have for this marathon, and although I'm well aware that there are some who will find fault with my training – too many miles for such an old guy, not enough rest days, blah blah, blah – I have zero regrets and would do nothing different. I followed the Advanced Marathonning (Douglas/Pfizinger) 18 week/70 mile Plus program and it was tough. Up until the taper, I averaged 80.1 miles a week and 11.9 miles a day from mid-December 2010 to April 2011. At various times it was hard, but no one can argue that I am disciplined, determined, and dedicated. Once I set a plan, I follow that plan. And I came very close to following the program to the letter. I ended up with just 2 rest days during those 16 weeks and one of those was a travel day. But I was as fit as I've been in years, and even dropped 6 pounds, which hasn't happened in many, many years. However; I also hadn't been 62 years old for a marathon either....

I ran a "BQ" in October 2010, but then the "Big Announcement" came about the new registration procedures and qualifying standards, and I seriously doubt that the BQ I earned is going to be good enough. It became apparent to me that I would probably need to run a time of BQ minus 5+ minutes to have a reasonable chance of registering for 2012. That meant running a 3:54 or better at Boston 2011, as I had no intention of running another marathon before 2012 registration opened.

As I keep telling people, I'm really not very good at marathons, and for the most part, don't even like running them. (Yes; I'm well aware that this sounds stupid coming from someone who just ran his 55th 26.2 mile marathon). There's just one exception – The Boston Marathon. Many are aware of my quest to initially qualify for and run my first Boston. It took me 22 years and 34 attempts, and qualifying was one of the happiest moments of my life. I tried so hard and for so long that when it finally happened, it was extremely emotional. For those that haven't read it, my emotional 1st BQ was documented in the Nov/Dec 2006 edition of Marathon & Beyond. And running that first Boston didn't disappoint; it was everything and more that I had dreamed of. I subsequently qualified 5 more times and ran 5 more Boston marathons, and the thrill never abated.

So; leading up to Boston 2011, I made no secret of my time goal. Many assumed that it would be easy for me based on my training, but I knew better. Even though I'd run 30+ marathons over the years faster than 3:54, I knew that I would have to execute a perfect race to have a shot at my "A" goal. Last year I ran a 3:56, and my strategy had been to run each 5K split in 27:00 up until I got to the Newton Hills. I did exactly that, and I was very pleased with the result. So this year I shared with some close friends that I'd strive for 26:45 splits and hope that my lack of hill training wouldn't hinder me on the hills. I also told many good friends that if I didn't run a 3:54 or better, this was probably going to be my last Boston (not by choice), and if so, my last marathon. Guffaws all around, I know. But you have to understand; I have no desire to run other marathons such as Big Sur, or CIM, or St. George's, or more international ones. If I'm going to subject myself to that much pain, it had bloody well better be Boston.

What happened? As has been happening on long races over the last few years, my legs just grew weary as the miles went on. The first few 5K splits were ~27:00, but I didn't panic. I've done this marathoning thing and Boston in particular a few times before....But somewhere around the 15K mark, I knew it just wasn't going to happen. Every time I looked at my watch after each mile split, I could see that I was slowing. The 8:40's became 9:00's. By the start of the second half, they became 9:30's and then 10:00's once I hit the hills. Saw my wife at mile 17, and told her it "wasn't going to happen". She knew what I meant. I never really slowed after a 10:04 on mile 18, but then again, I didn't speed up either. By the time I reached the top of Heartbreak, I realized that I'd have to battle hard just to break 4:10. And I did achieve that small victory. My final time was 4:09:14. I've felt worse physically and mentally at the end of other marathons. What was discouraging was the recognition

that I ran such a lousy time without hitting the wall or walking, or having any sort of physical problem. I was just slow. I ran as well as I could, and it just wasn't good enough. And that's a tough realization to stomach.

I have no regrets about my training, my preparation, my taper, my diet, my strategy, or surprisingly, just the way I ran on Monday April 18th. I wouldn't do anything different. About the only thing I can conclude after serious post-mortem and debriefing is that my problem is that I've had too many birthdays. And there's not a whole lot I can do about that. I won't be folly enough to say "never again", as that is pointless so soon after a disappointing marathon. Additionally; no one would believe me anyway. I do have rather a serious credibility problem in that area, earned honestly over the years. But I won't be running another marathon in the foreseeable future, and thus it's 98% sure that my 3:59:00 from Oct/10 is not going to be good enough to allow me to register for 2012. And then standards tighten up even more for 2013 and beyond, so in all likelihood, this was my swan song.

Doesn't mean I'm finished with running or racing. Those who know me know that being a runner is who I am. I'll probably continue to pound out crazy miles for "someone my age" because, frankly, I just love to run. And I love to race. In fact; I have 3 races lined up for the next 3 weekends. And I have run every day since the marathon on Monday. My legs are back to normal. Nobody recovers like me!

Enough feeling sorry for myself. Despite the way I ran, the weekend was absolutely fabulous, and I savored every minute of it (except for about 4 hours and 9 minutes on Monday....). It seems to me that since I have loved the Boston Marathon so much, maybe I should attempt to jot down the reasons why. Many of these will be no different than they are for thousands of others who have experienced this Holy Grail of running, but then again I've never been an exceptional runner, so why should I be significantly different?

Qualifying:

Boston is special because for the vast majority of participants, you have to qualify or earn your ticket to this event. Money alone isn't good enough. I'm like many, many runners who will tell you that the single biggest thrill in their running life was running the BQ and not Boston itself. When I arrived in the city for my first Boston, I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't worthy to be grouped with all of the fit athletes who had come from all over the world. Was I really one of "them"? Am I one of the "best" runners in the entire world? This average runner felt like a star. And that happened every time I ran Boston.

Tradition & History:

What other running race, or sporting event for that matter, has 115 years of history and heroes? We runners devour the stories of the original winners and losers, and are blessed to bump into many of the recent Superstars when we're there. 2011 was no different. Joan Benoit - the first women's Olympic Marathon winner - was there running on the same roads as the rest of us. I had my bib signed by 4-time winner Bill Rodgers, who just wanted to talk and talk. What a class act. But they're all like that.

Hopkinton:

Is there a more exciting start location for road racing anywhere that can beat Hopkinton? Absolutely amazing, whether you're in the Athlete's Village or camped outside on a club bus, or just meeting up beside the tennis court walls with a bunch of friends that you might only see once a year. It's magical. The 0.7 mile trek down to Main St and the start line seems interminable, but at least it's downhill! How can 26,000 people fit on that tiny little street? Being in corral 2 (of wave 3), I had a good chance this year to study the Korean Church, which is very close to the start line. Only bummer this year was lack of an air force flyover. Why?

The Course:

Like the Masters in golf, what is special is the historic course. It's a big surprise to first-timers how much of the Boston Marathon is really just a small-town event. The point-to-point course goes through numerous small towns on its way to "the

city". And that is part of its charm. And then they are surprised by the innocuous little UPHILLS in the first half of the course. No one tells you about them. Nobody gets surprised by the Newton Hills. They hit you like a jackhammer. But it wouldn't be Boston without the hills and especially Heartbreak. Even when they slow me down, I love it. Hey; this isn't your father's Marathon course! There are no finer turns in marathoning than the final two turns in the Boston Marathon. "Right on Hereford (for 0.15 miles); left on Boylston (for 0.4 miles to the finish)". When I charge up Hereford and make that 90 degree left-hand turn onto Boylston with the firehouse on my right, I can't help but smile. Because I know there are 8 zillion people lining both sides of that finishing straight, and THEY'RE ALL CHEERING FOR ME!

Spectators:

They really do line the route through all the small towns starting with Hopkinton, and then the crescendo builds the closer one gets to downtown Boston. I'm not usually a fan of big Megathons, but Boston is different. I still recall when I ran that first one how the spectators seemed just a little more knowledgeable and courteous than what you see at most of the big city marathons. I remember thinking how they were the experts (they knew just what to do and say) and I was a mere rookie that first time. It's as if their spots had been willed down to them from generation to generation. Much has been written about the Scream Tunnel in Wellesley at the 20K mark, and it always brought me a smile and a kiss or two from scantily-clad coeds. They seem more subdued the last few years, but maybe that's just how it seems to old codgers. I use to be able to hear them from half a mile up the road; maybe my hearing is going? The Boston College crowd is reinforced with more liquid refreshment and they can be even louder. This year, the police seemed to do a better job in keeping them from crowding the course, and I really didn't mind going past that section this year. The roller coaster downhill mile after Heartbreak didn't seem as wild this year. Maybe it was because I just wasn't running very fast. The crowds lining the last 4 miles are vocal and loud as usual. The Citgo sign is seen from a mile away, and it seems to keep moving away from the runners with each step. Crowds facing and with their backs to Fenway Park compete for who can be the loudest, urging on family and friends. You finally get to the Citgo sign, and then you know....only one more mile to go. Anyone can run one mile. Down under the underpass (which has not been a welcome change to the course the last few years), and then it's time for the greatest 2 turns in marathoning – see above.

Bars and Restaurants:

People in this city love their bars and their sports teams. Lots to choose from, and people tend to have their favorites. Over the last few years, we have tended to eat and drink in the theater district near the Boston Commons/Chinatown. We had a sensational Chinese dinner Saturday night; a super pre-race pasta load at Maggiano's on Sunday night with my NJ club surrounded by Runner's World forumites, and then our traditional post-race burger and fries with massive quantities of beer at Jacob Wirth's. Lots of people were there from our NJ running club, Running Times, and Runango. After drinking that place dry, a number of us went around the corner and crashed the RW Boston Forum party at the Sweetwater for the second year in a row. But they didn't seem to mind. By the time the night was over, I'd stayed up a few hours past my normal bed time and drunk more beer than I usually have in two weeks.

Friends:

This is what I will miss the most. I have met up with and made so many new friends each time we have gone to Boston, and truth be told, that has become a bigger part of the weekend than the race itself. If I never get back, this is what will make me feel empty. It's not running the historic course; it's not getting another Boston T-shirt or medal; it's the fantastic friends from all over the country and the world that I won't be interacting with. The thought of that makes me feel real empty. That makes me very sad.

It's been a great run. Thank you, BAA. Thank you, friends.