

The Garden Spot Marathon

By Pastor Andrew Paton

My running buddies know how hard it is for me to find marathons that don't happen on Sundays. I was very grateful when my fellow South African, Colin Saville, introduced me to the new race in Amish country. This event will help sweeten my disappointment at applying too late for the 2010 Boston Marathon. It was an extra joy to hear that my new Rotary and running club pal, Dr. Ken Sanchez, had also entered. I had little hope however of seeing them at the end because they are both much better runners than I am.

This is the second year that the Garden Spot is being run and they closed the registration at only 1000 athletes. That includes the half marathoners as well as the four person relay teams. I had a feeling I'd be running the last part with big distances between myself and those in front or behind me. That is indeed how it turned out. Mind you the thousand is still three times the number who entered last year. It was to cause a delayed start because the streets of New Holland were never designed for much more than the Amish horse and buggy. The race start was delayed as runners tried desperately to be parked and ready to run by 08h00. Mmmm perhaps one day, a-la the Boston Marathon, New Holland will become the Hopkinton of the South!

The race name sounded both pleasant and odd to me. I was delighted to discover that the proceeds will benefit the Garden Spot Village Benevolent Fund. When this adult retirement center found that unexpected challenges make it impossible for some residents to pay their own way they came up with this novel fund raiser. I'm glad they did. Keep it on a Saturday guys.

The 8am start meant I could still be in my own bed Friday night and, by leaving home at 04h30, I could do the 100 miles and be in New Holland PA by 06h30 for the race packet pickup. So, because of the traffic jam I found my teeth chattering awaiting the commencement of the long agony. The start was outside one of the 3 floor, single apartment, retirement complexes. I slipped inside and waited in toasty conditions.

Most of the course is laid out as an out-and-back route. I find that very motivational because you get to see the front runners and after a while you get to encourage the back markers. This time the 20 mile mark - the place I regard as emotional half-way - was still on the out-and-back section.

By the way: Marathon races originated when a soldier named Pheidippides ran from a battlefield in the town of Marathon, Greece, to Athens in 490 B.C., with the good news that Greece had been victorious over the Persians. Legend has it that Pheidippides delivered the momentous news then dropped over dead. Most of us know the feeling when those 26.2 miles have punished our frame. What bothers me though is that Pheidippides didn't run the whole marathon distance. He stopped after almost 25 miles. That's because Marathon Bridge is only 24.8 miles from Athens! That's how far the Olympics 1908 race went.

So where did those extra, painful, unnecessary, humiliating, teeth-grinding, (OK enough, you get the picture) miles come from? The distance was changed to 26.2 miles in 1908 when the Olympic Games were held in London so that the finish line was in front of the royal family's viewing box. The 2.2 miles was the distance from White City stadium to Windsor Castle. Grrr: the distance was increased for the convenience of the queen. I'm still annoyed that when I did the London UK marathon she only stayed out on her balcony to watch the first few runners go by. The nerve of these queens!

In any case the race began on a small hill which was a bit of a shock to me since I was expecting it to be a flat course. Then the hills became more rolling and in the end there was no flat to be found. During the night I awoke a few times to hear the wind howling in Clinton and that was a sign of things to come. As we traversed the hilltops, a very chilly breeze got in our faces. By ten miles into the race it

was clear that my hopes of a 3 hour 45 minute finish were fading fast.

One of the things I do to keep my mind off all the phantom (and some very real) pains that show up, is to chat to my fellow runners. Its getting more difficult to do because so many more run these days with dark glasses and i-pod ear pieces, as the thud of their music competes with the thud of their foot-falls. I did meet some interesting folks. One guy, with a very English accent said he came from the UK (town of Worthing) to live in, of all places, Flemington NJ. I soon had him clued up on the Hunterdon Hills Running club. Various other runners kept me encouraged and a lady from California talked me through the last 4 miles.

I was very pleased that the number of Porta-Johns has increased because I had to make two pit stops along the way - sigh! Old age makes the plumbing less reliable than it used to be. At about the 14 mile mark I passed Colin who was patiently waiting for someone to exit a John. We must both be chatty runners because time after time people passing me would say: "your fellow South African is just behind you and closing fast." Colin, that really motivated me to dig deep.

My running partner, Jim Hrubesh, who will be going to Boston next week, said he'd drive to the 20 mile mark to encourage me. He wasn't there! My spirits sank, because I knew some fierce hills were up ahead. I promised myself a walk at the 21 miler. Just as I was struggling up the hill Jim and his wife Brenda sang out their encouragement. Even more than that - he held out what every South African runner enjoys: a Coke. Ah, that perked me up and I struggled on to the finish.

Speaking of the finish, what a sadistic bunch of old folks to organize that the last 1.5 miles should be uphill. Needless to say my customary flourish at the end was severely dented. Oh, well, as I often say: "marathons keep my humble" - and this time I have much to be humble about! Not an easy course, but one I certainly see chance to do again in 2012. Next year I'll go do another Boston. Thanks for reading this - misery does indeed love company. I had to be satisfied with a just under 4 hour finish.