

**Nike Women's Marathon – My Adventure in San Francisco**  
**October 19, 2008**  
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Although I've never been a girly girl, this decidedly feminized event intrigued me for a number of reasons: it is held in San Francisco and the course covers some impressive terrain, the finisher's medal is a necklace rather than a bulky wall ornament, and, having run in only small marathons up to this point, I was curious to find out what a big-city event was like. So, last winter I entered the drawing for a non-fundraising slot (the vast majority of participants in this event enter through Team in Training and raise boatloads of money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society), and on April 1<sup>st</sup> I got an email letting me know that I was in!

2008 has been a year of ramped up training for me. I've adhered to a twice per week strength training regimen, done core exercises four times a week, and run many more quality miles than ever before, even incorporating a once-a-week speed workout into my schedule since July! Looking at the course elevation profile, I knew I'd need to be better shape than ever before since all my previous marathons were on relatively flat terrain. I felt good most weeks, with only an occasional flare up of a neuroma and the bobble-head dizziness that plague me from time to time.

Steve and I headed to the airport Friday morning, wondering which flight to SFO we'd be able to catch (one of the perks we get through his work as a pilot is the ability to fly as non-revenue passengers when there are unsold seats – a great deal as long as your travel plans are flexible!). It looked as though the late morning flight would have some empty seats, so we decided to have an early lunch in order to avoid needing to consume the hockey puck-like chicken sandwiches that would be served in the main cabin during the flight west. That seemed like a good idea until Steve began coughing and turning red as he tried to swallow a (big) bite of his sandwich. He stopped gasping and coughing and shook his head when I asked if he could breathe, but happily, just when I was standing up to try my hand at the Heimlich maneuver, he held his finger up, smiled and indicated that he could indeed breathe again. Crisis resolved, but a dramatic start to our weekend adventure!

We joined 46 members of the NYC Team in Training Chapter on the flight, and I chatted at length with the young nurse sitting next to me. A fairly new runner, she'd raised nearly \$6,000 – all together, the race raised on the order of \$18 million for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society through entry fees, Team in Training efforts and sponsorships. No telling how much Nike raked in through apparel sales!

Steve and I wandered down to Fisherman's Wharf for dinner Friday evening, and then headed up to Union Square for my packet-pick up. Having tested his gag reflex earlier in the day, Steve seemed content to wander around and admire all the fit young women gathered there. He actually claimed that he was checking out the booths to see if he could get any ideas to incorporate into the packet pickup for his River, Roots & Ruts Trail Run. As for me, I had to check myself as I made my way through the "Expotique" amidst racks of (expensive) pink Nike "Run Like a Girl" merchandise (that would be placed into pink "Shop Like a Girl" bags when purchased, (free) manicure and pedicure stations (somehow I don't think Steve's runners are into painted toenails...), a jewelry engraving station, an oxygen bar, a huge (expensive) wine bar, and other amenities aimed to please feminine tendencies that I was somehow born without. After getting my packet, we headed across the street to Niketown to find my name amongst all the entrants in a huge billboard plastered to the exterior walls of the store. It was an impressive site (yes, it was pink), but we didn't linger since we were tired from the long day of travel! Upon arriving back to our hotel room, I emptied out my packet and discovered that my timing chip was missing – either it was never placed into the bag or I managed to dump it out somewhere. Either way, I didn't feel like it was good sign, and it meant I'd have to maneuver my way back to and through the Expotique the next day...

Steve went out for a run, and I headed up to Union Square to remedy my chip situation. I was among the first in line when the Expotique opened and was in and out with a new chip in less than three minutes! Having accomplished my mission so quickly and easily, I decided I should go into Niketown just to experience whatever it was that was going on inside. I spent a few minutes gawking at the amazing displays of specialty merchandise (mostly pink, but sometimes powder blue) on the first floor before making my way back out the door. Steve and I spent the balance of the day perusing the public market, reading/computering, eating and watching the Red Sox make the playoffs against the Rays exciting.

Sunday morning activities consisted of the normal race day routine, and we headed up to Union Square at 6:20. We'd all been issued wrist bands to identify where we should line up according to anticipated finish times, and this system worked

really well. I got in the front row of the 9:00 to 9:59 minute milers, and crossed the starting line less than 3 minutes after the gun went off.

The first three miles through the Financial District and along the Embarcadero past Fisherman's Wharf were very easy and fast, then the hills appeared. Steve had run that part of the course many times on previous trips to San Francisco, and had advised me to stay on the left side of the course for the first major hill. That was good advice, and I stayed on pace as I made my way through mile 6, where the steepest hill of the day began. I took the hill at a slow jog, and was surprised to pass many walkers – it didn't make sense that I'd be passing people with faster anticipated finishing times. I checked my pace and felt like I was doing fine, so I didn't dwell on all the walkers. It was a cool (just under 60\*), cloudy morning, with no fog, and the scenery along the Bay and the Pacific was spectacular. As I made my way toward Golden Gate Park, it finally dawned on me that the walkers I was passing weren't runners at all, but Team in Training participants who had begun their walks long before the official starting gun in order to make it to the finish line by the cut-off time of 2:00. I'd really started to wonder what was going on, as many of these ladies didn't have the body type I've come to associate with faster runners, and I'd never seen fast runners take extended walking breaks, wearing tutus over their tights and Mardi Gras beads around their necks or chatting on cell phones as they made their way over a race course... Many of these walkers traveled in groups, and I covered some extra ground as I made my way around them along the course (my new Garmin 405 measured my run at 26.41 miles).

At mile 11, after I'd entered Golden Gate Park, I sucked down a gel and almost pulled off a choking episode like Steve's two days earlier. It took almost a mile before my eyes stopped watering and my throat stopped burning, and just then I saw Steve. He'd run to the park via a direct route from our hotel as part of his 14 miler in preparation for the NYC marathon in two weeks, and he ran alongside me from miles 12 through 14.5, even taking the pair of socks that I'd been handed as we passed the Lady Footlocker station (yep, they are pink). His presence was a boost, as was the fact that just before mile 12 the half marathoners split to head toward their finish so the number of walkers on the course diminished significantly (of the 20,000 participants, I think only about 5,000 ran or walked the marathon).

Miles 15 through 18 were relatively easy, and I was on a 9:33 pace, which was almost what I'd hoped for, given the hills (I was aiming for a 9:30 overall pace). The Pacific Ocean was a fabulous sight, and it was fun to see surfers making their way across our course on the Great Highway and into the waves. A long uphill section started as the course turned away from the coast, and for the first time I started feeling some pains running down my right leg. They weren't the usual fatigue-related pains I've felt before after running a few hours. These were like lightning bolts running to just behind my knee, and seemed to stem from my sciatic nerve. On Monday of the week before, after having been on my feet working at a special event all day Saturday and Sunday, I'd felt the same sort of pain, but it went away after about 24 hours. I walked a few times between miles 19 and 24 in an effort to relieve the pain, and each time I was able to run after a minute or two, albeit at a significantly slower pace (I dwindled down to a 9:42 average pace by mile 22). Just after mile 22, the 9:45 pacer passed me with a few runners in tow, and that spurred me to keep going and try to keep from getting any slower. By mile 23 we were heading back to the coast, and I was looking forward to seeing the ocean and the surfers again. Somewhere in the last couple of miles the surface of the road became really canted for a half mile or so, and the pain started shooting down my leg again, so I walked a bit. I really wondered if I'd have to walk the last couple of miles, but I remembered the story Beverly had told me a few weeks earlier about one of her NYC marathon experiences where, toward the end of the race, her pain got so bad that she couldn't do anything but stop, pull off the course, stretch and then test herself by first walking, then jogging. I decided to try a jog, and it actually felt better than walking. At that point, I just wanted to be done, so I picked up the pace and finished my last mile and a half at a decent pace, but I was off my overall goal pace, finishing with a 9:47 average.

At the finish line, I got my little blue box from Tiffany's from a handsome firefighter in a tuxedo (it's hard for me to feel anything except really tired and stinky at the end of a marathon, so I was a bit self-conscious about how I looked as he congratulated me) and moved through a very well-executed finishers' chute picking up more goodies (a bagel, banana, my finisher's shirt -- which, I'm thrilled to say, is not pink!, etc.). Sadly, that's where the delightful finisher's experience ended for me. Steve and I wanted to catch the late afternoon flight rather than waiting to take the red-eye, and I need to get back to our hotel promptly so that we could check out of our room by 1:15. I'd pre-paid for a bus ride back to Union Square from the finish line at Golden Gate Park, but the line to get on a bus was at least a half mile long when I found it. I realized that it might take me an hour or more just to get on a bus, and then the ride would take a while, so I started looking at maps trying to figure out if I could jog back to the hotel. I was pretty much brain-dead, but I figured I should start walking and try to find a taxi or a city bus, so that's what I did. Straight uphill, for about a mile. Just what anyone wants to do ten minutes after they finish a marathon! I met a nice fellow at the first bus stop I came to, and he told me the bus

would indeed take me close to where I needed to go. One minute later I was offering the bus driver my \$20 bill, but since the fare was only \$1.50, he wouldn't let me pay and just waved me on. The bus got really crowded, and I felt really conspicuous with my space blanket wrapped around my waist, holding all my race goodies in one hand while trying to hold on to the railing for over half an hour as I attempted to stay clear of anyone's breathing space (I'm sure I reeked) and figure out where in the heck I was. I finally spotted an area that looked somewhat familiar, so I got off the bus and jogged three quarters of a mile back to the hotel, arriving at 12:50! There was obviously no time for anything resembling an ice bath, but that didn't matter! With a quick shower and fresh clothing, we were out of the room and on our way to the airport at 1:21!

We made it home around 1:30 a.m., and although I'm a bit slow today, I'm feeling nothing more than typical post marathon soreness! It was a quick trip, and I didn't meet my goal of a 9:30 overall pace, but I count it as a successful run nonetheless. With all the effort I put in to get ready for this marathon, I'd really like to run an easier (flatter) and closer course this fall to see what I can do, but Philly has closed, I'm slated to work early in the afternoon of the Harrisburg race and we have family obligations over the Thanksgiving holiday, so that doesn't seem likely. Maybe I'll just have to run my own personal, unsanctioned marathon here in Hunterdon County one Sunday in November. Anybody want to join me for a long run at a 9:15 pace on a flat(ish) course yet to be determined??? There won't be a t-shirt or finisher's medal, but there won't be an entry fee either!