

Hartford Marathon.

If your purpose was to experience ideal running conditions like a 40 degree start and cloudless sky, today's Hartford was the race for you. If you wanted a pasta party where the cooking was gourmet for cheap you'd have been better off at the Quiznos Subs where Dan & Andrew ate after nearly going into Vitos - an Italian place for only the upper crust runners.

If you wanted super driving conditions to and from the race you'd have been delighted even though Andrew nearly took 2 highways at the same time. Even the "usual" trouble spots like the ongoing construction at Danbury was very mild.

Those valuing high-service, but low-cost accommodation will have to look a long time to beat the bill we paid at Pastor Aaron Blache's home. He turns the kitchen & its contents over to us and the beds are like most pre-race beds: fitful with apprehension. If you depend on a directionally accurate guide to the city and finding the right exit for your digs you'll have been a little tried by Andrew getting it exactly opposite - twice!! Must be something about being raised in the Southern hemisphere. Also be sure you ask directions at the deli when the English-speaking shift is on duty. We got it right second time around!

If a minimum turn-out of 200 vendors is your specification for the pre-race expo don't go to Hartford. Even the freebies seem less each year. We got a green soup that removes all oxygen (fortunately for us we had some spare in the bottom of our lungs.) We also we treated to an apple and some M & M s. No wonder Steve decided to drive 20 minutes into the country to the only runners shop in Hartford to get some special gels.

The start hummed with activity and must have been planned by General Tommy Franks. Nothing was too much trouble and there was a booth for every need. Sorry we can't say the same for the hot showers prospect at the YMCA across the street from the start. What a nerve! They've gutted the building for renovations without obtaining our permission.

If you don't like the pre-race national anthem to be sung by polished elderly singers you'd have been delighted by the polished 11 year-old singer who brought tears to our eyes. After a politically-correct, one-size-fits-all invocation they got us going.

If you prefer that the whole race be run in silence with no crowd support then the clapping-at-every-intersection and a huge variety of bands, duets & soloists are not for you. There was so much of that Andrew nearly had a doorman to open the porta-john along the way. The experience was so good that he repeated it 3 times along the way - not advisable for good chip times.

The out and back sections mean you can encourage your pals, unless of course they've "just met a girl named Maria", in which case you have to shout 3 times and wave frantically to get their attention. The huge drawback of course is that it feels like you've only taken 100 steps before to see the Kenyans powering towards you as they claim the 5K, half & full marathon awards. At one point Andrew saw a sign saying "In my mind I'm a Kenyan." Yeah, right - that's about the only place you're gonna be one!

For those who watch what you eat after the race - stay out of the food tent! They'll thrust bagels, cream cheese, hot soup of two kinds, fruit salad, mixed rice and beans, bottled water, Apple pie & cream, apples & bananas (and even a free beer) into your 4 hands - which is what you'll need. Disgusting really - after all we run to loose weight!

Don't let the easy nature of the course fool you - those trick puddles as you wind along the river bank and the long open stretches over huge highway bridges are meant to soften you up for the shock of approaching the 20 mile mark. Firstly they have pretty young ladies trying to tempt you

to stay left and finish with the half-marathoners and then there's the roar of the finish line that you have to pass and not see again for 6.2 miles and then there's the hill - O baby! - not for the faint-hearted, unless of course you're running with a girl named Maria who regularly needed her thighs massaged! We hear tell that Steve never even noticed the hill 'till he was coming down the other side.

Not every finisher has the strength to carry the huge medal they award. We noticed many only managed to stagger under it's weight to the lush, green grass of the park where they lay prone. We on the other hand went to claim our bags at the UPS trucks and some of us didn't even manage to make it to the back door before the bag was already in our hands. So all-in-all, as you can see there's a lot to hate about the Hartford Marathon and a little bit to like. Perhaps we can beguile a few more hearty souls into trying it next year.