

Steamtown Marathon 2010

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This is my first official stab at piecing together a race report, so please forgive any tangents that stray from standard format...if there is such a thing in this case.

Anyway, the 2010 Steamtown Marathon is the race I set my sights on not long after running my first Boston Marathon in April. It's not one I've ever run before, but had heard and read mostly favorable comments about. I was looking for a relatively friendly course, one that was conducive to producing BQs, since I was not among the 44% of the field at Boston to do so there.

I considered heading back to run Mohawk Hudson River – the site of my first BQ performance in 2008. That was a close one. I was on the cusp of flipping age brackets. I missed 3:15, which would have given me a BQ for 2009, but held on to finish (with nine seconds to spare) to reach what I needed to earn a spot for 2010.

Ok ok, enough about MHR. Yes, it will always hold a special place for me, but I decided to try something different this time as I have yet to repeat any marathon I've run so far, and there are so many other good ones to choose from.

Steamtown became a fairly logical choice early on, and never waivered once I'd made my mind up. Having had a taste of Boston, I needed to prove to myself that qualifying for it once was not a fluke. I needed to BQ at least once more, and do so without having the benefit of two different times to shoot for.

Fast forwarding a bit into training...

Those who know me well enough, know how predisposed I have become to recurring injuries, particularly to the hamstrings. Well, suffice it to say, this year has been no different. I may have lost official count, but know that I managed to reaggravate pulls and strains I've sustained in both legs multiple times; certainly more than one would care to count.

Anyway, yep, I did it again in this summer prior to running the Revolutionary Run, and then again in early September, which kept me shy about signing up for any half marathons as prep for Steamtown. It also at least partially prevented me from running my third and final scheduled 20-miler.

Yeah yeah yeah, I know. I'm a runner. It comes with the territory. Injuries are a part of what we all (or at least a good number of us) deal with on a regular basis. So, move on before everyone gets too bored to read anymore of this tale of trifle.

Ok ok, I get the message. So fast forwarding a bit more to race weekend...

On Saturday (10/9), I headed up to Scranton straight from youth soccer, and...did I mention that my right hamstring was really bothering me again?

Grrrr!!! Enough about the hamstrings already. Shut up, and talk about the race, will ya? Sheesh!

Ok, I know. I'm not a very good story teller. Just trying to make sure it's clear that I was certainly not heading to the starting line with a vast amount of confidence.

I had nearly reached Scranton when suddenly I realized something that quickly filled me with some anxiety. OH NO...I forgot to pack my race packet pickup form, whatever that is, but I know it was something I was told by race officials I needed to bring. What a moron!

Oh well, damned if I'm going to be turning back home to go retrieve it. I figured if there's going to be a problem, I'll just show someone the abundance of emails I have on my Blackberry from the Steamtown race director.

My worries were for naught, of course. I walked straight up to the packet pickup, and received everything I was entitled to without issue.

I then decided to get more of a lay for the land by finding my way to the motel room I had reserved in Pittston, which is about 12 miles from Scranton. Luckily for me, I wound up at the check-in line behind someone who seemed to have reserved half of the rest of the rooms, was paying in cash, and dealing with a clerk who seemed to have her hands very full dealing with one customer.

About 20 minutes later, I finally got my room key, dropped off my belongings, and headed back to Scranton for the pre-race pasta dinner. Not that I was expecting it to be, but it definitely wasn't a freebie. That being the case, I decided to load up. The food was ok. I've certainly had worse, and I didn't have to wait at all since it was cafeteria-style serving and seating.

After I decided I'd had my fill, I headed back to Pittston to take it easy the rest of the night. I flipped back-and-forth between playoff baseball and college football, and probably fell asleep around 9:30, which is WAY early compared to my usual routine. I guess being a youth soccer coach really can take a lot out of you.

The only problem was I woke up around 12:30 am, and was in complete disbelief that it could be that time. I was certain it was about time for me to start getting ready. I checked my watch, my Blackberry, the room clock and The Weather Channel. They all agreed that it was in fact about 4½ hours earlier than I needed to be up.

Of course, now I couldn't get back to sleep. So after watching a couple of bad movies I'd seen already, it was then time to get up, get dressed, and head back to Scranton to pick up

a bus to the starting line. Ah yes, nothing quite like feeling well-rested prior to running 26.2 miles.

Anyway, I boarded one of the many buses that were en route to Forest City High School, which is where I, other racers and several volunteers would hang out for about the next hour and a half. I passed part of the time by slathering up both hamstrings with Biofreeze. I'd never used it before, and it immediately reminded me of the scent of Ben Gay, which should probably come as little surprise since they're used for the same purpose. Washing my hands did not remove or mask the odor...at least not all of it.

Oh well, hopefully it'll at least work, I thought to myself. I think the only thing I really wound up accomplishing was offending the nasal passages of surrounding runners.

So as start time drew closer, runners began to file out of the high school gym to the roughly freezing temperature air, which is actually just what I was hoping for knowing that by the end temps would be approximately twice as high. I kept a throw-away sweatshirt on until the cannon sounded the start.

And they're off! I've always wanted to say that.

So I'd heard various experienced descriptions of the course, and one of the characteristics that I remember hearing most about is a considerable downhill grade covering the bulk of the first half-mile or so. Now anyone who's run Steamtown, or even knows anyone who's run it, also knows that the course progresses along a significant net descent...about 955 feet, according to the race website.

That said, various written and verbal offerings of advice are provided to NOT attempt to bank time in the early going. The first eight miles are almost exclusively downhill, so while that may sound appealing, anyone who's run it can attest to how much of a toll that can actually wind up taking on your quads, especially when you have to shift gears into heading uphill.

Uphill?!

They didn't tell me there were going to be hills that go up. Actually, they did. If you read and pay attention well enough to the emails and website, you should be prepared to hit some ascending hills, most of which appear along the latter stages of the course, particularly when you least look forward to having them pop up over the last three miles.

So I did my best to follow the sage words of wisdom, taking it easy, going with the flow while at the same time being mindful of the hamstring situation. I kept my stride deliberately shorter to guard against pulls, but long enough to avoid what I'd consider shuffling. This is of particular importance for me early on until I feel sufficiently warmed up.

Knowing the pace I need to establish and maintain to bag a BQ, it's easiest for me to break a marathon into sets of eight miles and/or mini-sets of four. As long as I'm running under 30 minutes every four miles (or about 7:30/mile pace), I'm in good shape.

Even though I know what a 7:30 pace feels like, I have a bad habit of letting my typical race-day anxiety get the best of me, and wind up going out too fast. This being my ninth marathon, I was fairly determined not to let that happen this time.

I thought I did a fair enough job by finishing the first mile in 7:39. Not too fast; not too slow, and I felt comfortable. Now the trick was to maintain it, and not get worked up over early splits. I will admit though I did (as usual) check my watch after each mile. I didn't tap it to track splits, but I do know that I reached mile-4 at around 29:30. So far, so good, but it's still really early of course.

Then I remember reaching mile-6 under 44 minutes, and mile-8 around 58:30. I was feeling pretty good, and gaining confidence. The first set was now in the bag, leaving two more to go plus the final stretch.

One by one, the miles continued (for the most part anyway) to go according to form. I grabbed water at almost every aid station, but never really took more than a sip or two. I made it to mile-12 just under 1:28.

Uh oh, somewhere along the line I picked up a little too much speed. I still felt comfortable though, so I dialed it down just a hair. Most of the major downhill were also behind me at this point.

I hit the halfway mark at around 1:37 and change. Now I had to ask myself (as probably most marathoners do) whether I could maintain what I was doing for as long as I'd been doing it. Yes, I had a couple minutes in the bank to work with, but the true test of training on the hills of Hunterdon still also lay ahead.

Just about to enter mile-15, I headed into the first segment of Rails to Trails, which is wide enough to support up to three runners abreast. The trail surface itself was primarily a mix of gravel and dirt; not too dissimilar from running Columbia Trail, except this being more predominately downhill. I did also find myself having to look down more to be prepared for any stray rocks, ruts or roots; which there were of course.

Mile-16 was now behind me, and I was still well on target with a split of 1:57 and change. Sorry about all these estimates, by the way. I'm going on memory, which is pretty good, but I don't tend to retain the seconds portion in most cases.

So the good news at this point is that I've completed my first two eight-mile sets, and I've still got some time in the bank. The bad news, however, is that I'm no longer feeling as comfortable as I was earlier (gee, go figure), but my right hamstring is still behaving anyway.

Not sure why this split is of any more special importance than the rest, but the only one that's officially clocked for this race is at mile-18, where my chip time reads 2:13:21. That comes out to a 7:24 pace, so things are still looking pretty good. There's some good cheering in through here as runners loop around a park, and pass by a marching band prior to entering the next segment of trail, which seemed softer and more forgiving than the earlier segment. My legs are getting heavier though, and my splits are starting to show it.

As I hit mile-20, I had about 50 minutes left to cover the last 10K of the race. That doesn't sound so bad, but some panic begins to enter my mind about a mile later when I realized the bank of time was beginning to fritter away as is the strength in my legs.

I made it to mile-22 at 2:45 and change. Not good. Now I was starting to fall behind 7:30 pace, and I still hadn't hit the real hills yet.

I finally did though heading into mile-23. So the question I had to ask myself at this point is how much I really wanted a BQ, or whether I could be satisfied with anything less. The answer to the latter portion of that was a resounding "NO!" I had come too far to simply allow the wheels falling off the wagon be my only excuse.

Now it's time to put up or shut up about being among those who consider themselves Hill Runners. So, on the hills came.

I reached mile-24, and my watch was just about to turn over to 3:04. My eight-mile sets were done, but I still had 2.2 miles of stretch run and one more hill to go. Pain was shooting through both quads, but I became more determined than ever not to give up as I pass the 25-mile marker at 3:12. I gave up on taking water from the final aid station for fear of losing precious seconds.

Hey, this is finally starting to get kind of interesting now, isn't it? Ok, humor me if it isn't.

I distinctly remember passing by one neighborhood block with about a mile to go, hearing someone yell, "If you want 3:20, you gotta go now!"

I don't know if it was that challenge I needed to hear, but I forced my legs to shake off the concrete they were now encrusted in, and charged up the remainder of the final hill.

As I made it over the crest, a long straight-away lay in front of me to the finish. Now I realize it may not have looked much like one, and I'm quite sure my stride was even more awkward than is typical for me, but I kicked for all I was worth at that point. I didn't glance at my watch when I hit mile-26...again for fear what that might cost me.

The finish clock drew more and more into focus. What I could first make out with about 100 meters to go was 3:20:44. Not even having time to think about chip time, all I knew was that I might have only 15 seconds left to cross the finish line to make my goal.

Now I'm watching the clock every last step of the way, heading toward the crowd of finish line supporters, who were plenty loud considering their numbers.

Just as I prepare to take my last stride to strike the finish mat, I see the clock reads 3:20:59. I lunged forward hoping (but unsure) whether I'd made it, and then staggered into the arms of a couple of race volunteers, who grabbed me before I hit the ground.

I tried to explain that I was ok, and that I just felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. They laid me down on a stretcher, when I realized I hadn't stopped my watch yet.

When I tapped it, it read 3:20:58, which was of course by no means official. So all I could do now (besides get back on my feet, which I did pretty quickly to convince those helping me that I really was ok) was wonder, "Did I make it, or didn't I?"

With rigor mortis settling in on my quads, I decided not to hang around Scranton to find out. I just wanted to go home. There's one hitch to that part of the story though.

Unfortunately, I couldn't remember exactly which parking deck I left my car. No, I'm not kidding, and don't laugh.

I hobbled around looking for the nearest decks, but those closest to the finish line weren't the right ones. I swallowed my pride, and asked for some help. After a couple of less-than-fruitful attempts, I was of course eventually pointed in the right direction.

I passed by some other runners meandering toward one of the other decks I'd already visited when one male participant made the light-hearted observation, "Hey, you're walkin' kinda funny."

I could only laugh a bit in response while uttering, "This is nothing. You should see what I look like after finishing a marathon."

Finally, I found the right parking deck, and then my car. I dumped myself into the driver's seat, and headed for home. I didn't call, text or email anyone to let them know how I did, because I wasn't sure what to say yet. All I knew was it was very close to a BQ, and that I'd given it all I had that day to make it.

When I got home, nobody else was there, which is what I'd expected with Lisa in the middle of a training ride, preparing for her second Ironman, my older son on a Boy Scout hike, and my two younger ones being babysat elsewhere.

So I took advantage of the opportunity to take a shower, and climb into bed to rest and wait for online results to be posted. I wasn't necessarily expecting that to happen later the same day, but it did.

When I searched for my name, I found the clock time did in fact read 3:21:00. My chip time, however, was 3:20:33. For me, that's a PR by a mere 17 seconds, but it was also good enough to earn me the right to sign up for at least one return trip to Boston.

Now, if you managed to last this long reading through this story, congratulations and thank you. Hopefully, if I ever decide to produce another marathon report, it'll be shorter with fewer references to the word "hamstring".