



My First and Last Boston Marathon

By Blair Howard

I wanted to end my road marathon career in the best possible way and despite the freezing wind and rain, I believe I accomplished that goal. This race may go down as one of the years that the old timers talk about in the future as one of the most brutal Boston Marathons as the driving, cold rain was blown into most runners faces by a wind right off the frigid Atlantic. The conditions definitely slowed everyone down, but I think it also distracted me from the normal challenge that running 26.2 miles as fast as you can, can be. The weather may have been the headline, but that in no way should distract from the challenge of the course. Even in the best conditions the course from Hopkins to Boylston St. can be a challenge.

In packing the week before the race I saw the forecast could bring bad news and so brought most of my foul weather running gear, unfortunately that did not include a poncho. I was well equipped for the race with a double layer of gloves, a long sleeve shirt, my GVH singlet, shorts and long socks, but I was not prepared for the hours of waiting, of moving in and out of the rain, mud and freezing temps. The logistics of moving the thousands of people from Boston to Hopkins was easy enough even for a first timer like me, as I don't think I suffered any more than anyone else before the marathon. The collective suffering of the entire event was helpful, whether it was huddling together in the tent waiting to walk out to the starting corrals, trudging up windswept hills or passing each other on the streets of Eastern Massachusetts.

As for the race itself, I was well warned by veteran runners and non-runners alike that the start was going to be hectic, to not waste energy trying to fight through the crowds just to run a particular pace and to just take what the crowd and course gave you, which for me was some starting and stopping on our way to the start line where things got off to a smooth but not too fast start. I was glad I listened to them as I was able to navigate the many people pulling over to vacate their bladders half a mile into the course, tossing now extraneous clothing two miles in and everyone else poorly navigating the hydration stations. By mile 4 I was able to keep moving up through different packs of people, usually going along with a couple of familiar people, whether it was the one guy with two leg tattoos or the Argentinian runner who was running in what looked a bit like a wrestling singlet. The normal way that I race is to unconsciously get stuck between two packs, not wanting to run too aggressively to keep up with a pack but not running slow enough for the pack behind me. This was the first race where there were so many people I always had a pack I could stay with and depending on the conditions keep up with or push up to the next pack.



For most of the middle miles I was clicking off good times, even entering into perhaps a PR territory at times, but also knowing I was trying to save my energy and strength for Heartbreak Hill. I kept on telling myself to save it for the hills of Newton as well, to not make the mistake I usually make around mile 12 to click off a couple of sub 6:40 miles. I was feeling good through these miles, despite the cold and rain. The weather did get to me by taking away any dexterity in my fingers as they froze and I dropped my fuel at mile 13. I knew there would be some gels handed out around mile 17 so I didn't need to panic, rewarding me for reading the race information on the flight to Boston. As I entered Wellesley some of the volunteers on the side of the road kept letting me know "Here come the girls!" I was really confused by what this meant but as I climbed up a hill and heard the roaring, shrill cheers of Wellesley college, I knew what they had meant. It was the first time in the race I really felt the cheers from the spectators deep inside myself. It was invigorating to be uplifted by the encouragement before I really needed it. I could feel my quads starting to get heavy, but I was able to cruise for miles on the positive feelings from the crowd. There were several people throughout the course yelling out "GVH!" which whether they knew what that meant or not, provided me with momentary boosts of energy.

As I started up Heartbreak Hill, I told myself to ignore my watch and just get ready for the last 5 miles after the hill. While the hill sapped the last of my leg strength and my pace slowed, I did not feel the normal wall hitting typical of the early 20's. As I glided down the hill and tried to recover some life in my legs I really focused on drawing positive vibes from the crowd who were out there not for their own benefit and who braved the same horrible conditions without any of the accolades or glory. My pace the last 5 miles fluctuated wildly, but I was enjoying every step. I could not perceive any of the people passing me, only noticing the people who had bonked and were walking, knowing their suffering after doing the same in my first marathon but also knowing that I was not with them today. I was propelled by just giving into my body and the cheers passing a huge smile on my face that was probably hard to see between the bill of my hat and the buff covering the rest of my head and neck. As I turned off Commonwealth Avenue towards Boylston Street, my heart was uplifted by all of the cheers of the mass of people and felt why this race is like few others. While I could have stayed slow and basked in the cheers, pretending it was all for me and not the hundreds of other runners around me, I sped up determined to leave it all out on the course and pay for it later. The finish was one of the most exhilarating moments of my life and I powered on through, barely able to hold up my arms in relative triumph.

Of course the logistics of the race were not done with me as I was processed through the long line of finishers, picked up my drop bag and then made my way away from the zoo of people that was the finish line. Trudging through the streets, the pain I had avoided all race caught up to me as the cold and wet now sank into my bones, and all I wanted to do was get back to the my dad who had sponsored the whole crazy trip and back to the warm hotel shower then bed. When I finally embraced my dad, I was



sharing all the joy of running with one person instead of dispersing it amongst the thousands of the marathon course.

Since returning from Boston, speaking to my students and colleagues about my experience has cemented how special the experience of running the Boston Marathon has been, reinforcing the gratefulness I feel to my body for carrying me through the races, my wife for allowing me the time to train and to race and to my dad for supporting my running goals in material and immaterial ways. While I am fairly certain this is my last road marathon and I am happy it was this one, I also know if I ever was to return to running road marathons, it certainly be to try and experience the magic I have only experience in the Boston Marathon.