

## HELSINKI MARATHON August 16<sup>th</sup> 2014

Three o' clock on what is generally a hot August afternoon seems an unusual time of day to hold a major city marathon. A week before travelling out to this one weather reports, showing afternoon temperatures as high as 27 degrees in Helsinki, had me wondering what I'd let myself in for. Before leaving I'd tried, without success, to uncover the logic behind an afternoon start in the middle of August. The two low-key UK marathons I'd run since the Stockholm DNS had both been run in very hot, (for the UK!) weather and I'd suffered in both. The humidity in Dundee, a city not known for its tropical climate, had a number of us struggling around its course at the end of July – an experience I was hoping not to repeat. (If Alex Salmond and his friends succeed in the “Yes” vote at the forthcoming Scottish Referendum, can we count this as having run in another country?) This was to be the 34<sup>th</sup> edition of the Helsinki event, however, so there's obviously a valid reason for the organizers to retain the same claiming date.

After a full day's sightseeing in what was a beautiful and interesting city thoughts had now to be focused on the following day's marathon. Registration for this was open from 12 noon on the Friday and until 1pm on the Saturday in the Tulo Sports Hall on the appropriately named Paavo Nurmi Street, immediately in front of the Olympic Stadium. There was even a large bronze statue of the great man at the entrance to the stadium car park. Remembering his battles with our own Brendan Foster, I was even more delighted to find, in front of the sports hall, a smaller statue of that other great Finnish distance runner, Lasse Viren, winner of double gold at 5,000 and 10,000 metres at successive Olympics in 1972 and 1976. It's about a 30 minute walk along the main road from the Central Station to the stadium, but this can be avoided by taking the number 4 or 10 tram. I preferred the more scenic stroll on the pathway through Hesperia Park by the side of Toolonlahti Lake, particularly as we were to run that way during the race. Registration was an easy matter as the crowds hadn't yet built up – I'm told it's more congested on the morning of the race. There was little in the Expo of any real interest, just the usual merchandise and representatives from marathons I'd already completed. The event Pasta Party as such, wasn't so much a party as an offer of a 6.90 euro discounted meal on production of your race number at Vapiano, a city-centre restaurant. As it seemed to be full every time I passed, I decided to stick with the reindeer meat I'd found in the Quayside market.. Within minutes I was outside and on my way with number, chip, purple T-shirt, 250ml. of shower gel that went in the bin and a carrier bag full of paper and assorted tat. My main interest lay in taking a look at the nearby Olympic Stadium where the next day's race would finish on the track. The Stadium has a fascinating history. It was completed in 1938, after the Finns – flushed with their athletic successes of the 1920s resolved to seek the ultimate prize of playing host to the 1940 Summer Olympics. These Games were initially given to Tokyo but, due to threats of a boycott over Japan's war with China, Helsinki was asked to step in and take over. Unfortunately the Second World War intervened and the 1940 Olympics were cancelled. It wasn't until 1952 that the Games finally arrived in Helsinki. Nowadays, like many similar stadiums, it largely hosts large-scale pop concerts and can count Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, U2 and Madonna among the artists appearing there. Strangely, since March 2007, a Eurasian Eagle-Owl has been spotted living in and around the stadium. It even delayed play for ten minutes by perching on a goalpost during a Euro 2008 qualifying match, much to the amusement of Helsinki's citizens who subsequently christened it Bubi and voted it as the city's Resident of the Year. I decided to keep an eye out for Bubi while finishing in the stadium the next day!





Above: Outside the Olympic Stadium. Below: Moral support from Mo before the Start

We were all back outside the stadium again the following afternoon watching the last of the thunderclouds rolling away out to sea. After the rain came the heat and, even worse, the humidity. As someone whose performance is badly affected by this, I knew I was in for a torrid afternoon. A children's Mini-Marathon earlier in the day had already been and gone and, fortunately, with no simultaneous Half Marathon or 10k to contend with, we were going to have the whole course to ourselves. Apparently over half of the route follows the Helsinki waterline so hopes built up of cooling breezes to come. We were told that there were approximately 6,200 of us from 54 different countries by the announcer who then proceeded to take up a great deal of time by thanking each of the 54 countries individually. Then we were off – on a 3km loop around the back of the stadium initially and then alongside the Toolanlahti lake mentioned earlier. After crossing the main road, the next 2 km took us westwards towards the coast. At this stage crowds were both large and vocal; a huge contrast to what we were to encounter as the course followed the perimeter of the Bay. The next 10km were largely run on what were, at times, congested cycle tracks around the coastline with traffic thundering by on adjacent roads.

At 15km we crossed a bridge over a dual carriageway to head back eastwards towards the town. My memory of landmarks here is a bit of a blur even though the next stretch between 15 and 21km was the main out and back section of the course. I can only think that, at this stage, the humidity was beginning to take its toll. Things perked up a bit after half-way when we reached a beautiful, large, landscaped park affording breath-taking views out to sea and a host of tiny islands. Having turned a corner at 23km, we were running towards the South Harbour and our first views of the city and, in particular its iconic symbol; the Lutheran Cathedral. To our right could also be seen the Russian onion-domed Uspenski Cathedral – each of the five domes is said to be topped with 22-carat gold. Incongruously placed nearby is a huge ferris wheel and a rather weird statue of what looks like a giant alien urinating into the harbour! This brought us past the Old Market Hall, the ferry landing and the market stalls with their enticing food smells; through enthusiastic crowds to emerge onto a lap of the nearby Esplanade Park.

The Esplanadi is Helsinki's most emblematic park and, with its two quite different streets on either side, is always a magnet for locals and visitors alike. The northern side is home to boutique shops, expensive bars and cafes including the popular Esplanade Café, while the southern side houses much larger institutions that replaced the older, wooden buildings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I'd arranged to meet Mo in the middle of the park by the statue of J L Runeberg, the poet who wrote the lyrics for the national anthem. She could see I was struggling and as well as offering encouragement, also mentioned that, if I felt like pulling-out, our hotel was only around the corner! I was sorely tempted but, having got to 25km, I knew I could manage a run/walk to the finish from there. It was a case of head down and retrace our footsteps back to where the 33km mark on the return journey met the 15km mark on the outward leg. From there the course took a delightful detour across the Bay that we'd ran round earlier, crossing a couple of wooden bridges that joined up the islands in the middle of the water. There was

even a pleasant trail section through woods before rejoining the cycle path that took us to the 38km point. I'd spotted a runner of about my age wearing a Melbourne Marathon vest, an event I'm down to run shortly. It helped the kilometers pass quickly having someone with whom I could have a natter. Id long ago given up all thought of the 4 hour 15 minute time that I set out hoping for. Though the temperature had now dropped to something approaching acceptable, the damage had been done by the humidity levels earlier in the race. From 38km it was back towards the city and along the pavement next to the main Mannerheime Road until a footbridge took us into the park at the rear of the stadium at 41km. It's an unbelievable feeling entering the tunnel to emerge onto the track of a famous Olympic Stadium. Despite the 5 hour finish there was still quite a large crowd cheering us on and you couldn't help but attempt to pick up the pace for a "sprint" to the line, (the owl was nowhere to be seen)

On finishing we were handed a substantial medal before being led past a succession of stalls handing out goodies such as bananas, energy bars, yoghurts, crisps, tubs of margarine, packets of rye bread and, best of all after consuming water and isotonic drink for 26 miles, were the hot cups of coffee on offer. I have to congratulate the organizers on a brilliantly organized event. After 33 years of practice they'd really had everything worked out with 16 well-marshalled drink stations at regular intervals along the course plus sponges and shower sprays to combat the heat. Free massages were offered both pre and post race and there was even free swimming facilities for runners in a complex nearby. I'd paid 77 euro to enter and considering everything, I felt I'd received good value for money compared to similar events.

Jim Manford