

Members only marathon, 2014.

This year the Member only marathon was held on the Leas in South Shields. The route was dumb bell shaped, a turning circle at each end and a track between the two. The marathon should really be described as a trail marathon, there was very little tarmac, but to be honest it was an easy trail route (no big hills). The route meant that as a club event I worked out I would be able to see and say hello all the other Marathon Club members at least 4 times on the route, if not more. The start time given to each runner was based on their estimated race time, so that we would all finish at around the same time - perfect timing for the buffet after the race.

I am getting ahead of myself a bit; I will start at the beginning for my race. I have always enjoyed the North East Marathon Clubs members only marathons, a benefit of being in the club is the option to take part in these races. They are partly competitive but also partly a social run, and when Jim announced that the 2014 members marathon was going ahead I put my name down. This is my first marathon of the year, well the first since last years Montreal Marathon.

My training has changed a bit this year compared to other years, I have scrapped my car so my commute is by public transport, and I have worked out that if I get the train then walk the 1 1/2 miles home, or if I run the 7 miles home and allowing for the wait for a train or getting changed I get home at roughly the same time. This run to race a train is something I was doing before but only half the distance. My run home now also includes a (Garmin measured) mile long hill, and then another 1/2 mile long hill. My other training is a lunch time run of about 5 to 6 miles quite fast. Some days I do one of the runs, some days I do both. I am hoping that this increase in miles will have a positive affect on my race times. I have been hovering around the 3 hour marathon mark for too long and I think I should be able to go quicker if I can get the training worked out. As a first marathon of the year, this was going to be a test on my training.

Sunday morning was a bit foggy, and I had a frustrating drive north to South Shields. The A19 was not busy at that time but there were too many cars who hadn't considered putting their lights on in the fog. A right turn to South Shields to hit Gypsies Green stadium, and I followed the last mile of the Great North Run the wrong way to get to the race start. I was in time to see a few runners set off and a few complete their first laps... this was not good knowing that I was already over 6 miles behind and the gap was getting larger with every minute.

Jim and George were at the start and were keen to set the runners off when they were ready. The final positions would be determined by the runner's time rather than the overall race time, so 5 minutes here or there made little difference. As it happened by the time I had said hello, watched a few runners pass, get changed and made sure I had paid for enough parking I was at my allocated 11:00 start anyway. From the entry list there were 4 runners due to set off at the same time, 1 had dropped out, 1 had volunteered to do first aid duty at the last minute and the other was a no show. I was left to start alone. In a way this is frustrating to be in a race and have no direct competition; I might as well be running a long training run. Mentally I had to tell myself that my goal was to unlap myself in the 4 laps I had and the 3 laps the others had left of the race. Not having someone on my shoulder pushing me at the start might have worked in my favour, I was fully responsible for my pace, I had no one to race against and I quickly hit a pace I was happy with. My mind still says though that if I had someone to race head to head with I could have gone quicker.

I set off and soon caught another runner, but only had a quick chat, I was a lap down! The trail was easy running really and I think if you enjoy running on it the miles feel easier - it was certainly easier than I found Montreal. My easy pace let me catch up with the next group of 3 runners as we got to the midpoint of the lap, a quick drink and we were off again, I pulled away fairly easily and then hit Ian and Suzanne who I am getting to know quite well despite only ever seeing them for half an hour before races and our chat lasted a good couple of miles. I had to apologise, we could have kept chatting that way all morning - but a lap down on these two and only 3 laps to catch them up was going to mean I had to push on. I took a wrong turn here - left at the first bin rather than the second and luckily Ivan pointed this out otherwise I would have done the next 3 laps the same.

The race turned into something more like a 26 miles social call on my running friends from the club; run a few miles, say hello and have a chat, take off again to see the next people, have a chat for a mile or so and then off again. My lap times were about 44 minutes, 43, 44 and then 49 minutes - the 49 minutes wasn't due to slowing down but I was chatting for 80% of the last lap!! This is quite pleasing and I felt strong enough that the last lap could also have been a 44 minute lap - good even pacing all the way.

Second lap was the same as the first, chat, faster run, chat, faster run and so on. At the midpoint of the second lap I saw that Paul Blakey had pulled out - but like he said "there is always another one". End of the second lap and Garmin should have said 13.1 miles - the course was pretty much spot on 1/4 marathon each lap which is very unusual and well planned to get it like that. Garmin said I needed to make up 0.08 mile, a small detour should do that. The third lap was similar to the other 2 and all the runners were getting into their stride and I think enjoying the run. I was passed by a large group of cyclists as they cut a corner (I noticed one had an Athletics Club top on so I guessed they were sympathetic to us), I had a feeling we could be trading places for a short while - which would have been fun but would have ruined my last lap. Luckily I got to the grass short cut track and they carried on the other way. Just before the last lap I caught 2nd place runner and we chatted most of that lap. My plan was to get a 3 hour marathon, and so far had used up 2:11 of that 3 hours, giving me 5 minutes in the bag to chat with. I said I'd go to the midpoint with him and then carry on but in reality we went to the 3/4 point of the lap and my 3 hours was going to be a close thing - I had to run on again. Hitting the last down hill road section, I passed Ivan again and Garmin said I had 15 seconds to get to the finish. I just made it.

As for the actual route, Jim and the team had managed to pull another good route out of somewhere and I enjoyed it. We started by the pub at the south end of the promenade to run south along a grass / gravel track and then up on top of the cliffs along "Redwell Lane". The continuing south past the Marsden Grotto, Souter Lighthouse, and to turn at Whitburns beach car park. The turning car park had a water station, well manned by 2 volunteers. Going north again we re-joined the middle section of the route and another marker showed up where to leave this track to take a grass field 'short cut', then look out for the litter bins and at the second bin go left (this was more sort of following the obvious route of the track) to start the second turning circle. Hit the road and down to the beach and pub and that is an easy 1/4 marathon done. Now repeat 3 more times.

There are a number of paths on the common and it was easy to perhaps choose the wrong path, having other marathoners to chase though it was clear where to go. If this had been a normal 'open' marathon there might have had to be a few more direction signs. I took a slight short cut near the end of the first lap and comparing Garmin's had cut 1/10 mile from my distance. I was able to make this distance back again over the next 3 laps leaving Garmin to read 3:00:00 and 26.2 miles (My official race time was 3:19 but I took a while to get the GPS started). A couple of other runners took alternate routes, in fact after I had finished 2 of them ran a lap of the pub to make up their "short cut" distance. This made me think, we are all marathon runners in the club, and we were all going to run 26.2 miles that day even if we had to do extra little laps.

Apparently the views across the sea are brilliant however the fog was still lingering all morning, the hope I had of it burning off to give me 2 nice sunny laps never materialised. Half way through the second lap I heard the lighthouse fog horn starting up - not because of the fog it was a runners children pressing the button to encourage us, if only we knew that as we ran.

Overall I finished the fastest, in a time of 3:00:19 and I was happy with my time. Before the race I had decided that a 3 hour marathon was a good goal to aim for this time and in reality I think I could have been 5 minutes quicker, possibly more. I would run the route again as a marathon and I have to really thank everyone who spent the time putting it all together. Needless to say that the organisation was done well, the information sent out to the runners was good and at the level of the open (not members only) North East Marathon Club marathons. The route was good in another way that the eternal problem of marshalling a marathon and this one required minimal marshalling. The plan for all the runners to finish together sort of worked, we were all home in time to go up for the buffet and club AGM. I think that the handicap system must have worked OK, and I can appreciate its appeal to the race timers who are not stuck on their own for hours at a time with not a lot to do.

Setting off home to the A1 I picked up the Great North Run route and drove the wrong way back to Gateshead - running has a few benefits and one is that I know that route and how to get from Gateshead to Southshields (and back again). I was tempted to keep going and complete the 13.1 miles to the Town Moor however I had promised to be back in Glasgow to tuck the little ones up in bed by 8:00

With Jim and David Parry at the Finish

