

RIGA MARATHON, LATVIA. May 18th 2014

After Gdansk and Tallinn, this was the third of the Baltic coast marathons I had on my “to-do” list and I still had Stockholm and Helsinki to run this year. Vilnius and St. Petersburg will have to wait until next year. The area has held a fascination for me since being compelled to study the Hanseatic League during A Level History many moons ago. (For those of you who don’t have a clue what I’m on about, the Hanseatic League was a powerful 12th century economic and defensive alliance within the cities of North Germany and the Baltic that left a great cultural and architectural inheritance. It tickled me that the guy who set it up rejoiced in the unlikely name of Henry the Lion!)

Riga, Latvia’s capital, with around 700,000 inhabitants is the largest city in the Baltic States and houses more than one third of the country’s population. The city is divided by the Daugava River which flows another 15 km north into the Gulf of Riga. Old Riga, the historic heart of the city, (commonly referred to as the Old Town), is a mixture of cobbled streets, church spires and crooked alleyways that stretches 1 kilometre along the river’s eastern bank between Valdermara iela (street) to the north and 13 Janvara iela to the south. As Valdermara moves away from the river it turns into Brivibas bulvaris, (Freedom Boulevard), with its narrow ribbon of parkland and scenic canal. This is an inner-city oasis protecting the medieval centre from the grand boulevards just beyond.

After the sightseeing it was time to get down to the main purpose of the trip and start thinking about the next day’s marathon. The race organizers had been very good in keeping us informed about developments by sending out regular emails in the preceding months. They’d even warned us about the high temperatures forecast for race day and provided sensible advice as to how to cope. However, they’d delayed notification of the venue for registration until shortly before I left the UK. This was to be held at the Olimpiskais Sports Centre some 3.3km from my hotel. Unfortunately, as no information was given as to how best to get there by public transport; it proved a long, hot and tiring walk there and back alongside busy roads. Frankly, it wasn’t worth the bother. I was less than impressed by the absence of stalls at the Expo and, other than picking up number and chip and a few bits of tat, there really wasn’t any incentive to go there. (There was a facility in place to pick numbers at the Start line on the morning of the race; I’d do this next time) I’d paid a very reasonable 35 euro to enter and had decided against paying an extra 25 euro for an event T-shirt on seeing on the website that all previous year’s shirts had been white in colour. This year was no different; the 25 euro would have bought another white T-shirt with, believe it or not, the design of a snail on the front and a few undecipherable words in Latvian on the rear. The organizers promoted it as if it was a work of art! How’s this for an entry in Private Eye’s “Psueds Corner?” “The design of this year’s official adidas supernova T-shirt has been created by Ilmars Blumbergs, one of the most famous contemporary Latvian artists of all-time. And he has chosen a typical Latvian country creature-snail-a slow and optimistic one as the symbol for this year’s marathon. Mr Blumberg’s irony is very evident - he is trying to say that we should relax, should not be afraid to be slow and just enjoy the race!” I didn’t need to be told that, nor did I need to be wearing one of Mr Blumberg’s 25 euro creations to run like one of the creatures on it!

As predicted, race day started out hot and humid. Standing on the Start Line at 8.30 am with a headache and a hangover, I knew that a torrid time lay ahead of me. For Mr Blumberg’s information, I wasn’t afraid to be slow; I just didn’t want it to hurt. Steve Bruce and Arsene Wenger were definitely to blame for my predicament. I’d met up with 100 Club friend Dave as planned early the previous evening and after a couple of beers headed into Paddy Whelan’s at 7 pm to watch the Cup Final. The fact that neither Hull nor Arsenal could finish each other off in the normal 90 minutes meant that instead of returning to our hotels only slightly the worse for wear, the extra two rounds needed to be consumed during extra

time ensured that we ended the night very much the worse for wear, (or at least, I did – not a great way to be with a marathon early next morning!)

How sensible is this the night before a marathon?



The marathon has been popular in Riga since the mid 1980s. The first races were based on the idea of Latvian independence and were known as The Folk Song Marathons. The course in those days was in multiple laps and runners were invited to cover as much of the distance as they were capable. On finishing they received a part of a Latvian national symbol, (a fragment of the national costume for example), giving the participants the feeling that they'd run for the independence of Latvia. The first official Riga Marathon, organized by the City Council, took place in 1991 just before independence from the Soviets was achieved. Initially only several hundred took part but in recent years the race has gained in popularity in the international running community. In 2007 it became a member of AIMS and in 2012 was upgraded to the IAAF Road Race Bronze Label, the first race in Northern Europe to receive this award. Apparently the course has changed each year so there is no official course record to compare performances to. This year's attendance for the four distances on offer broke all previous records with a combined entry of over 23,000 runners of whom 2,500 were international athletes from 61 different countries. This made Riga the Baltic's biggest running festival with 1,485 of us in the Full and 3,715 in the Half Marathon that started simultaneously. There were 5,666 in the 12.30 pm 10k and a whopping 12,327 in a 5k race starting at 1.30 pm – basically a full day of running to keep the spectators' interest.

This was yet another marathon where the shorter distance half marathoners were set off behind the full marathon competitors. Very soon the inevitable happened and the faster runners from the half were pushing and shoving their way to the front. Things got worse every time the half marathon pacemakers with their posse of followers wanted to get through. Surely it's not beyond the bounds of human ingenuity to devise a system where say, the 2 hour half marathoners start with those hoping for a 4 hour marathon time, the 1 hour 45 group starts with the 3 hour 30 marathoners and so on. Anyway, it was chaos at first. In view of the previous night's alcohol intake I was determined to drink as much and as often as possible at the water stations. Unfortunately, I was running on the left hand side of the road at the first station and simply couldn't fight my way across to the first station placed on the right hand side. I stayed on that side for the next one and guess what? While approaching, an English voice on the tannoy announced that those seeking refreshment should run on the left hand side of the course. I missed out again. At the third station the drinks were on the right, I was on the left as instructed. Some might think this inconsequential: not if they were at risk from dehydration on such a hot and humid day.

After that things settled down and there were no more problems. In fact, I was impressed with the organizational infrastructure in place on the course. Vast quantities of water were available every two kilometers or so and there were also isotonic drinks, bananas and oranges at every station after 8.5km. Gels were meant to be handed out at 15.5 and 28.5 km but both Dave and I were unable to find these on the second occasion.

The course itself, though artificial and manufactured, had some interesting points. We started running along the river initially before turning inland back towards, then through, the city centre before making our first crossing of the Dauvaga River via the Vansu Bridge at 4 km. Returning to the bridge again at 10 km we were taken back through the city before turning at the 14 km mark and running a further 5 km in the opposite direction along the river bank. After losing the half marathon runners, a much quieter second lap kept us in the outer suburbs and away from the river until going back over the bridge at 32 km. Presumably in an attempt to minimize road closures where possible, we often found ourselves running along one side of the road before turning and running back in the opposite direction. Some I spoke to afterwards hadn't liked that aspect of the course. It didn't bother me; in the high humidity I was just intent on finishing! I guess I must have sweated the hangover out of me, (everyone was totally lathered), after a few kilometers and was actually running ok until about 30 km when, yet again, I had to resort to a run/walk to the finish.

One of the interesting innovations worth mentioning was the integration of the "Culture Kilometre of Brivibas iela" into the marathon programme. Brivbas iela is the main street in which, during the run, there was a special programme of Latvian themed music, performances and traditionally dressed guards of honour on raised plinths. As we passed on each of the four occasions something different was taking place. It provided an interesting diversion and something to look forward to on the way around.

At the finish we were presented with an excellent heavy-duty medal, one of the best I've received, depicting a collage of most of Riga's iconic buildings. We were also handed a canvas Riga marathon bag containing a variety of drink and foodstuffs. Finally, marathon runners only were allowed access to the free beer supplied by Aldaris, Riga's premier brewery. The Mezpils Tumais – a strong dark beer went down a treat. Meeting up with Dave that evening we both agreed that despite one or two organizational errors the event had been enjoyable and one that we'd both be keen to repeat.

Jim Manford May 21st 2014

At the Start

