

## STOCKHOLM MARATHON May 2014

Such is the popularity of this marathon that I entered it the day entries were opened almost a year ago. True to form interest in this year's event was greater than ever; the race filling up quickly with almost 22,000 runners from 93 countries taking part. This was the highest figure in the race's 36 year history. I'd last visited western Sweden over forty plus years ago with stays in both Gothenburg and Malmo. Lots of things have changed since then. Not only have Abba come and gone while the Volvos just keep on going; but the country is now connected to Denmark by a bridge-tunnel across the Oresund that I'd seen whilst in Copenhagen en route to the Hans Christian Anderson marathon. I'd yet to make it as far as Stockholm on the east coast and had certainly never before run a marathon in Sweden. I was, therefore, looking forward to this trip immensely where Mo and I planned on meeting up with 100 Club buddies Dave Goodwin and Paul Richards.

Unfortunately, even the best made plans sometimes go wrong. I believe it's called "Sod's Law!" Medical problems in the week before the race meant having to travel to Stockholm unsure as to whether I was able to run or not. I delayed making a final decision until the morning of the race but, after talking things over with Mo and the lads I had to finally accept their advice and concede that I was in no condition to complete a marathon. (Those who know me well will understand how much it hurt to have to withdraw!) Reluctantly, I gave my chip to Paul to hand in and set off before the runners for a lonely walk around the course. Normally in these circumstances I wouldn't be bothering with a race report but, having done everything but run the darn thing, I feel sufficiently qualified to provide an informed opinion on the event that might help others considering running it in the future.

We arrived early on the Thursday afternoon to brilliant sunshine not realizing that it wasn't going to last for much longer. The plan was to register early and then walk around most of the first loop of the course that co-incidentally included most of the sights we would have aimed for anyway. Registration was held in a specially erected tented village behind the Olympic Stadium on an area that I guess would have incorporated the warm-up track for the 1912 Games. Is it just me or are these Expos becoming less and less fun to visit and more and more like cynical marketing opportunities designed to maximize sales of over-priced, technicolour merchandise to a captive audience of runners? This one was nothing more than a glorified shop where we were forced to go to pick our numbers up. There were no tempting free samples of food or drink, no bargain items of clothing, nothing in the way of entertainment; just a succession of stalls selling expensive running gear. We were given number and chip only – no T-Shirt until after the race. The Pasta Party ticket wasn't valid until the next day and given the rain and how I felt at the time, the thought of standing in long queues for lukewarm pasta just didn't appeal. The only other item of interest was the fact that our race number allowed us free transport in the metro area on race day – no big deal if you were, like me, within walking distance of the Stadium. The Stadium itself is a classic sports arena. Built for the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, it looks similar today to what it looked over 100 years ago. Over the years a number of major sporting events have also been held there including ice hockey world championships, national football matches and, oddly enough, the 1956 Olympic Equestrian events despite the Olympics that year being in Melbourne! Apparently, quarantine regulations at the time made it impossible to take horses to Australia. Over the years, no fewer than 83 world records in athletics have been broken on the track – a world record of world records no less. After a quick tour of the Stadium, I left Registration weighing up the pros and cons between what we were given and what we forked out - from memory, something like 112 euro.

We've moved a long way away from the original concept of the marathon where the focus was on the let-the-best-man-win contest between runners prepared to test themselves over an irritatingly difficult distance. Nowadays your average big city marathon as Van Morrison

would say, “Is all show biz!” Contrast the build-up to this year’s event with Stockholm’s first marathon in 1979. The story behind this is often quoted to prove the point that, with enough determination, almost anyone can set up a marathon. (That’s true!) Despite lots of entrenched opposition, Anders Olsson a former sports journalist inspired by an article about the New York Marathon, decided that Stockholm needed its own event to boost the profile of distance running in Sweden. Just over 2,000 runners entered the first event with the field more than doubling in 1980. Among the finishers that year was Bjorn Ulvers of Abba fame, (the one married at the time to the gorgeous blond Agnetha) Bjorn finished in the highly respectable time of 3 hours 23 minutes, proving that some people not only have all the luck, they’re also blessed with considerable talent. The following year numbers almost doubled again with Sweden’s former world heavyweight boxing champion, Ingemar Johansson being among the finishers in 4 hour 40. Surprisingly, the men’s course record of 2 hour 11:37 set by Britain’s Hugh Jones in 1983 hasn’t been broken since. This year’s Kenyan winner, Benjamin Bitok recorded 2 hour 13:21. The female record was also set in the 1980s by the legendary Grete Waitz and stands at 2 hour 28:29 – a full 4 minutes faster than this year’s Swedish winner. There can’t be too many big city marathons these days whose course records have stood for so long.

### Inside the Olympic Stadium



It was scant consolation that I was by no means the only one to drop out: of the 21,500 entrants only 16,075 completed the race. These left in two starting pens from outside the Olympic Stadium at 12:00 and 12:10 respectively. Oddly enough given that the starts were seeded according to time, pacemakers aiming for the same finishing times started from both groups. The heavens opened again to thoroughly soak everyone on the very congested start line but fortunately that was the last major shower of the day and conditions improved as the race progressed. The marathon route consisted of two separate, unequal laps. The first 16+ km

involved a circular tour around the city's perimeter including the islands of Gamla Stan and Soderman. After 18km the course spent the next 10 km or so meandering around the parklands of Ladugardsgardet and Djurgarden before reconnecting with the original lap again at 28km and repeating the remainder of this to culminate in a Stadium finish. Spectator support on the two city laps was plentiful with Saturday shopping crowds helping to swell the ranks of bystanders. Support on the middle section, however, was thin on the ground and very reminiscent of the riverside stretch on the Amsterdam Marathon.

For those who'd bothered to read the organiser's comments about the course there were some interesting aspects other than the obvious to look out for en route. Shortly after hitting the waterfront at 3km the course continues past Normalmstorg, the square where a famous bank robbery in 1973 gave name to the psychological state known as Stockholm Syndrome, based on the behaviour of the victims who continued to defend their captors even after their six days as hostages were over. Just after 5km, after running around the east side of Gamla Stan, the course passes through Slussen, ("the Lock"), where boats are raised and lowered between the freshwater Lake Malaren and the Baltic Sea. It was here that the lead group of seven East Africans came steaming past; seemingly in a race of their own and already over two minutes ahead of the rest of the field. At 8km the toughest ascent of the race takes you over Vasterbron, Sweden's largest arched road bridge. The crossing of this reaches the main city beaches on Kungsholmen, (King's Island), usually crowded in the summer months, (but not today!) At 12km the route approaches City Hall, a romantic masterpiece with three gold crowns, the ancient symbol of Sweden at the top. The prestigious Nobel Prize ceremony is held there each year.

The course now continues back into the city, past the Central Station and away from the waterfront, descending at 14 to 15km past the Public Library and back towards the Stadium via Sturegatan; the little park used as the site for common graves for victims of the plague. Turning away from the Stadium without entering, at just over 18km the parkland loop begins by entering the diplomatic district, past the West German embassy occupied by a terrorist group in 1975. Two of the hostages were killed as their demands were refused by the German government and more people died when the explosives installed by the terrorists exploded. The next landmark, standing in splendid isolation among all the greenery, is the 500-foot high Kaknas Tower with its radio antenna, one of the tallest buildings in Northern Europe. The 24km mark brings us over the canal, scene of the 1912 Olympic rowing, and on to Djurgarden, (meaning "the Animal Garden") As well as entertaining the deer hunting Swedish royals, lions and bears were used here in animal fights in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Just before rejoining the inner city loop for the second time at 28km the route passes the famous Vasa Museum dedicated to the warship of the same name. When the Vasa set sail in 1628 she was reputed to be the world's most powerful warship with 64 cannons and 300 men. Sadly, she sank on her maiden voyage but was raised with great difficulty in 1961 and restored as a fully rigged ship.

This time round the race goes into the Olympic Stadium instead of skirting away from it, finishing directly on the home strait in front of a fairly packed grandstand. Finishers are then led out of the stadium to receive medals, T-Shirts and goody bags. The medal this year was a substantial affair depicting the entrance to Skansen, the world-famous open-air museum, while the shirt was a mid-blue with a green motif of a runner crossing the finish line. The goody bag contained drinks, (pepsi and an isotonic), cashew nuts, raisins, banana, chocolate bar and a plastic "Stockholm Marathon" water bottle – so no complaints there. Dave had finished in 3 hour 16 and Paul in 4 hour 1 minute and I was anxious to seek their opinions from a runner's perspective. Both were reasonably happy with the organisation of the event. Aid stations were plentiful and evenly spaced with adequate water and energy drinks throughout – though both were given in cups. The stations were also equipped with bananas, glucose tablets, coffee, cake, flap jacks and, for some reason, gherkins! Both also enjoyed the

atmosphere created by various bands, DJs and dancers around the course. Their misgivings centered around the level of congestion on the course and the lack of running etiquette shown by many of their fellow competitors. It seems pushing and shoving and a general disregard for fellow runners was endemic at times. Naturally, these are things you don't see when you're simply strolling around the course like I was. Both Paul and Dave felt that the race has reached its optimum capacity and that entries should either be reduced or, on no account exceed the current level. They also felt that the entry to the starting pens was poorly controlled, allowing runners to simply walk into pens to which they hadn't been assigned. This, of course, usually works to the disadvantage of the faster runners and shouldn't be allowed to happen. Their final reservation, not a major one, concerned the long walk after finishing within the stadium to the point in the registration area where medals etc were given out.

With Paul & Dave outside the Stockholm Olympic Stadium before the Start



Nothing my friends said would put me off entering the event next year. I've got some unfinished business with Stockholm. Due to illness, I've missed out on adding Sweden to the list of countries in which I've run. (It would have been the 30<sup>th</sup>) It's very disappointing, especially as I'd been entered for the race for almost a year. I accept that you can't do much about ill health. It creeps up on the best of us and I've been fortunate to have avoided it for most of my running career. As marathon runners we chose our races well in advance, pay our entry fees, book flights and accommodation at considerable expense and then keep our fingers crossed that we're fit and well enough to take part on the day. Usually it works – occasionally it doesn't. There's always the next one to look forward to.

Jim Manford

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