

VANCOUVER MARATHON May 4th 2014

The marathon coincided with a planned vacation in British Columbia. It allowed me to add a new country to those in which I've run as well as keeping me on track to complete my bucket list of 20 new marathons in 20 different countries within 20 months. This was number 14.

We'd spent the previous week in Victoria, returning to Vancouver for the marathon weekend and pre-race registration. This took place in one of the large Convention Centres inside the Canada Place building. May is the beginning of the cruise season in British Columbia and for the first time this year the building was flanked by two giant cruise vessels ready to take on board the first of the thousands of tourists sailing the Inner Passage to Alaska. Arriving at what we thought was way too early for the Friday morning 11am opening we were greeted by orderly queues already in place. Given that there were 5,000 marathon entrants plus 10,000 in the Half Marathon and a further 2,500 in a separate 8 km event the queues shouldn't have been unexpected. These figures provide an interesting comparison to the numbers in the city's first marathon in 1972. On that occasion a mere 51 runners turned up to run a five-lap circuit of the Seawall around Stanley Park. Though the organizers had dubbed it as a "Health, Sports & Lifestyle Expo," the registration process appeared no different to those experienced at other marathons throughout the world. We were handed our personalized number and chip, a canvas bag, pair of gloves and a lovely bright yellow T-Shirt and were then left to wander around the usual stalls of exhibits. I'd say Vancouver is a little more generous in giving out freebies than many of my most recent marathons. Containers of chocolate milk and yoghurts were handed out freely and there were lots of other goodies to be sampled without charge. Before leaving we were issued with transport passes to enable us to get to the out-of-town start before the event.



At the Expo

The travel pass certainly proved useful. After two days of hot sun Vancouver was hit on marathon morning by one of those monsoon-like rain squalls that frequently blow in from the Pacific. I've not experienced rain so cold and so persistent for a long, long, time, (the Shakespeare Marathon of 2012 comes to mind – and they cancelled that one on the start line!) This was a point-to-point course with the start

being in the Queen Elizabeth Park in the outer suburb of Oakridge. We'd been advised to take the Sky Train to Oakridge station and then walk to the park. It turned out to be an exceedingly wet walk of close to thirty minutes with most of us arriving in the park already feeling like drowned rats. Worse still: there didn't appear to be any shelter whatsoever near the start line. The 10,000 half marathoners had already left from there at a very early 7am and their sodden discarded clothing and empty drink containers still littered the area. Those of us arriving later were faced with the unsightly scenes of thousands of runners sheltering in the lee of buildings or shivering beneath trees. It's not as if there weren't any venues in the park that couldn't have been opened for us. I spotted what looked like a Racquets Club and a baseball stadium where shelter could perhaps have been made available. Ironically, one of the local runners informed me that before the start of last year's event the competitors were seeking the same shelter under buildings and trees; from the hot sun!



At the Start, (everyone else was sheltering from the rain!)

The organizers had us placed on the Start Line in coloured "corrals" (their word) according to estimated finishing times. I was in the grey corral for the staggered start with a start time scheduled for 8.38am; eight minutes after the elite runners had set off. I was still standing there at 8.44am, shivering uncontrollably in the never-ending downpour. I'm afraid that's just not good enough for what prides itself on being a major world marathon. (The organizers made much of the fact that it was named as a Top 10 Destination Marathon by Forbes.com and one of the world's most "exotic" marathons by CNN Travel) Finally we were off; with space in front of us in which to stretch our legs – the runners in the red corral were, by now, well up the road. My plan was to try to stick with the 4hr 15 "pace bunnies" (their words again) until finding out that all pacers regardless of finishing time were under orders to run 10 and then walk 1 minute all the way around the course. I find it difficult to stop running when I don't need to, preferring instead to take my run/walk breaks only when I'm too tired to continue at a running pace. They were right, I was wrong, as I was to find to my cost when the 4:15 group came past me before the finish.

On leaving the park we continued south for three kilometers down the long, straight Cambie Street, past the Oakridge Sky Train station we'd left what seemed like

hours ago. The first turn took us west down a slightly downhill gradient for a further five kilometers when, just past the 8 km mark, we encountered the one and only hill on the course. The crowds standing out in the rain were really encouraging as they cheered our efforts to get to the top. The route then entered the beautiful Pacific Spirit Park, continuing westwards past the imposing campus of the University of British Columbia, before emerging at 16 km near the Seawall on Marine Drive. We followed this past the half-way mark with tantalizing glimpses of the ocean and Locarno and Jericho beaches on our left until reaching the trendy seaside suburb of Kitsilano at 24 km. At this stage, cooled by the rain and with a breeze on our backs, I was still running strongly and anticipating a sub-4hr.15 finish. As anyone who's run a marathon knows, however, it's a big mistake to count your chickens too soon. Within the next few kilometers I was to be reduced to my own version of the run/walk philosophy.

The beachside suburb of Kitsilano, (affectionately known as Kits), is an interesting place. Originally inhabited by the Squamish people, it became a haven for Vancouver's hippies in the 60s and 70s, but has now gone very much up-market with many of its former timber homes being upgraded and restored for the yuppie brigade with their fashionable shops and chic galleries. Not that we could see much of any of this in the mist, wind and rain. I was lucky to see my watch!

By 30 km we were finally heading back into the city over the Burrard Bridge leading us along English Bay to meet the Seawall path as it entered Stanley Park at 32 km. Now I was on familiar territory having run around the Park earlier in the week. As our hotel was nearby Mo was waiting there as arranged with the camera, a couple of gels and some encouraging words. Had we known how bad the weather would turn out to be I think we may have cancelled this arrangement: we were given gels en route and the photos only accentuated what a dreadful day it was. Actually, the torrential rain was less of a problem for the runners, (as long as you kept running), than it was for the poor spectators who'd committed themselves to offer support. They say you can't do anything about the weather. You can't!



Still going at 32k

We should have been enjoying the best views on the course during the final 10 km around Stanley Park. On a clear day you look over the Inlet, past the lined-up oil tankers, to the wide Pacific with stunning vistas of snow-capped mountains on Vancouver's North Shore. This year it wasn't to be. At 39 km we came round the final bend in the Seawall to be confronted by the white sails of Canada Place at what seemed an arm's reach away. Unfortunately we still had a further 3k to go past the display of totem poles in the Park, past Vancouver Yacht Club and, finally, the Rowing Club before turning eastwards into town along Georgia Street, the city's main thoroughfare.

We finished in West Pender Street, a non-descript skyscraper canyon. I couldn't help thinking that the organizers had missed a golden opportunity here to showcase their marathon. A major international marathon needs a recognizable, iconic finish location to show to the world, (think London, think New York etc.) It's not as if Vancouver doesn't have such a location: Canada Place with its white sails was just around the corner – in fact, anywhere on the nearby waterfront, only metres away from where we finished, would have made for a better end to the race. I'm sure the organizers have considered this and that there are sound logistical reasons for finishing where we did but, nonetheless, it was a disappointing anti-climax, (I nearly wrote "damp squib!") At this stage, having stopped running, most of us were shivering and just wanted a warm bath and some warm clothes after receiving our medals and a generous collection of food and drink. On leaving I saw runners collecting their clothing, which had been placed in clear plastic bags, from tables standing out in the rain. I hope their clothes were dry!



Finished!

Jim Manford May 12th 2014