

Zurich Marathon April 6th 2014

I'd been disappointed some years ago when running the Geneva Marathon to find that so little of it actually followed the shore of Lake Geneva. Most of its course had taken us through agricultural land on the outskirts of the town. I recall thinking at the time that Geneva, for whatever reason, had made a big mistake in neglecting its greatest asset. I'd heard good reports about Zurich, though. Unlike its neighbour, Zurich's marathon route appeared to take us both out and back alongside its Lake's shoreline. As I enjoy running by water, particularly where there's also a background of beautiful scenery, this seemed an excellent event to include in my itinerary

The Registration in the out-of-town Sportshalle appeared a very low-key affair for what promotes itself as a major city marathon. It took less than ten minutes to be guided through the small number of exhibitors' stalls and pick up my number and goody bag, (no T-shirt though, this was presented after the race – as it should be) The bag contained an couple of packets of what looked like muesli, another couple of packets of powdered drink, a belt of sorts, lots of irrelevant paper, the race programme in German and a free ticket to that afternoon's Pasta Party attached to our race number. I'd already decided that I wasn't going to repeat the long journey out to the Sportshalle for this; I'd plans involving boats and trams.

It was still drizzling at 7 am the next morning as I headed off on the faithful tram to the start by the Lake. This time Line 7 from in front of the station took us to the Billoweg stop close to the baggage storage facilities located in a number of old railway carriages, still on their tracks. Some runners chose instead to make for the Sportshall to change in the warmth and to return there for shower facilities after the race. A succession of shuttle buses had been laid on to convey runners the two kilometers between this venue and the start. To me this was an unnecessary journey as a local tennis club right next to the storage area provided adequate shelter in which to change clothing.

With friends before the Start



This was to be the twelfth edition of the marathon. I knew that because the guy next to me on the start line sported a special gold number bib inscribed with X 12 indicating that he'd ran all eleven of the previous versions. According to the literature over 9,500 runners had registered

in total for the three main events of the day. Of these, approximately 2,300 were lined up for the 8.30 am marathon start; the remaining bulk of the runners were either in the 8.38 am Team Relay or the 8.40 am City Run over an unlikely distance of 9.8km. I wish race organizers wouldn't do this to us marathon runners, (though I understand why they do – it's called "making money") It meant that throughout the race we were continually being knocked and bumped by those running full pelt. The first 9+ kilometres were particularly bad and I got to dread the sight of the bright yellow T-shirts of the fast-paced City Runners flying past. Even when they disappeared off the scene after the magical 9.8km, we still had the fresh-legged relay runners to contend with along the full length of the course.

Anyway, after a lot of noise and shouting in German, and cheered on by the enthusiastic crowds at the start we made our way eastwards past the ferry terminals at Burkiplatz and across the River Limmat, past the Opera House to the first turn on the lakeside road. From there we looped back on ourselves towards the ferries once again where, at just over 5km, we were directed towards the city centre. This took us most of the way along the Sunday quiet of Bahnhofstrasse with its designer-label emporiums standing empty and deserted. Turning again near the station we followed the parallel thoroughfare of Talstrasse back to the start and the 10km mark. From there it was heads-down and dig-in for the next 15km along the lakeside road. I'd like to say at this point that we enjoyed magnificent views of the Lake all the way. We didn't. For far too much of the route the scenic views were obscured by buildings and the spectator support minimal. It was only on reaching one of the few lakefront villages that the Zurichsee could be appreciated in all its glory. We also had the opportunity of viewing the faster runners who, having reached the turn, were now returning at pace towards the city on the opposite side of the road. I was amazed at how far in front of the rest of the field a group of about eight African runners appeared to be. The race was won by Hayle Lemi of Ethiopia in 2hour 10:39 – a full 5 and a half minutes slower than his compatriot Kenenisa Bekele managed that same day on the streets of Paris.

Meanwhile, nearer the back of the field where I happened to be, things were also starting to heat up. This time though it was only the weather. The sun made its first appearance since my arrival in Zurich and the second half of the race became both hot and humid. Running conservatively I reached half way in just over 2 hours. As this was the farthest I'd run since my operation in December, I was now into unfamiliar territory. Fortunately, PowerBar was the official food partner to the race and the organisers kept us well supplied with these, plus Powerade, water and bananas at regular intervals – there were gels too at a couple of places in the later miles. So, well fed and watered, I managed to remain in the company of the 4 hour 15 pacers until almost the 20 mile mark where the lack of decent endurance training finally started to show. From there it was the Plan B walk/run routine most of the way to the finish.

The final few kilometers saw us leave the Lake to repeat the loop up Bahnhofstrasse and back to the finish from where we'd started out. This time the warm sunshine had brought the crowds out in numbers – there were even people brave enough to be swimming in the Lake itself, something that no one would have considered in the previous day's murk. The whole finishing area had a welcoming festival atmosphere with bands playing, loudspeakers blaring and supporters milling around. I was pleased to have run to twenty miles, seven miles further than previously this year, and even more pleased to have knocked a quarter of an hour off my time three weeks ago at Limassol. It was encouraging that fitness levels are returning slowly. All that remained was to pick up the medal and the rather nice T-shirt, collect a couple of bottles of drinks, an apple and then return to the tennis club to change while sitting in the sunshine taking in what I'd just achieved.

The organizers deserve great credit for putting on an excellent event. Everything seemed to have been thought through with typical Swiss efficiency. We were continually updated with emails before the event and even though most of these were in German, I'm not complaining – after all it's me who doesn't speak their language. It's not as if there wasn't an English

version of everything on their website. On turning my mobile on back in the hotel, I was surprised to find no fewer than three text messages from Datasport: one welcoming me to the event, the second telling me that I'd reached the half-way point in 2:05 and the third pointing out, presumably for the benefit of others as I was still on the course, that I'd passed the 38km mark and would be reaching the finish shortly. At first I thought it was a bit of an over-kill until, shortly after, a fourth message arrived with my finishing time. When I got home there were numerous photographs of me on the course plus a video as I crossed the line – there's also a diploma to download. You get the impression that they've really taken on board what the average runner is looking for in an event. You could argue that for CHF 110, it's no more than what we deserve for our entrance fee. I'm not sure why Zurich is not more popular among marathon runners. I suspect it suffers from being held on the same day as Paris and Milan and close to London, Rotterdam and Vienna. There's also a whole heap of popular marathons on in the UK on the same day – I certainly didn't hear many British accents on my way around. All things considered - a flat scenic, lakeside course in a well-organised event around an impressive city - I'd recommend this one to all fellow marathon tourists.

Sprint to the Finish!

