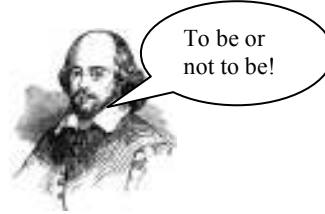


SHAKESPEARE MARATHON April 29th 2012
(or “THE MARATHON THAT NEVER WAS!”)



What a debacle this turned out to be! I turned down the chance of running at one of the two new marathons in Manchester or Milton Keynes so I could go to Stratford-on-Avon to join a couple of my colleagues celebrating personal milestones there. (Arthur Zammit had chosen the Shakespeare to run his 100th marathon while David Phillips, one of the founders of the 100 Club, was running his 400th on the day – or at least, they both thought they were!)

The weather forecast for the weekend was horrendous and the organisers had posted a warning to this effect on their website the day beforehand while assuring everyone that the event would go ahead regardless. This time the forecasters got it right for a change and it was a sorry and sodden bunch of runners who stood soaked on the startline on the Sunday morning while the usual pre-race public announcer droned on inaudibly in the background, drowned out by the usual nervous chatter among those about to set-off.

Never in most of our wildest dreams did we think that the incomprehensible announcer was trying to inform us that the marathon had been cancelled and that we were now lining up for what would be only one lap of the 2 lap course, for what had now been turned into a Half Marathon event. Certainly, if the message had got through, I would have done what I later discovered several of my friends nearer the public speakers had done and simply handed in my chip and demanded my money back. As it was, it was only while at the 7 mile mark that the message finally filtered through that we were no longer running a marathon – simply a half!

The initial feelings of bewilderment and dismay soon turned to anger as a number of us contemplated wasted journeys, wasted time and wasted money on a meaningless, mere training- distance event that none of us had planned to be part of. Apparently the reason given was the condition of the small section on the clay-surfaced Greenway. Admittedly there were large puddles and some surface water on this stretch, but certainly nothing to suggest it wasn't worth running on. Demoralised and de-motivated, we trudged wearily back to the finish. The medal given out at the end went straight into the Avon.

While normally reluctant to be too critical of fellow race organisers, I have to say that whoever made the decision to cancel the marathon got it wrong big-time on this occasion and owes the runners a huge apology, for a number of reasons:-

- 1) Having posted on their website “THE RACE WILL GO AHEAD” (their capitals) less than 24 hours earlier, that's exactly what should have happened on the day. Runners turned up dressed for the conditions and expecting to run. Marathon runners, by nature, are a hardy bunch used to running in all conditions. So what if it was wet and windy. Sometimes that's what makes the challenge all the more interesting! Marathons should only be cancelled if there is a major threat to the health and safety of the runners which could affect their wellbeing. This wasn't the case yesterday. I've completed marathons in worse conditions at Langdale and Snowdonia. Last year's Solomon Kielder with it's horizontal rain was just as bad .
- 2) The pre-race communication was hopeless. Minutes before the race start with all announcements being inaudible above the noise made by 2500 chattering runners was not the time to try telling us that the marathon was cancelled. Surely it was not beyond the bounds of human ingenuity to devise a more efficient and effective way of getting the message across. Even the marshals en route were unaware of what was happening – the sight of them attempting to hand us wet sponges in the torrential downpour proved pure irony!
- 3) I'm not being cynical here but you can't help but wonder whether (a) by starting everyone the organisers were simply attempting to prevent money-back claims or having to offer free entry next year (b) their thoughts were focused more on the welfare of their marshals than that of the runners – it's obviously no fun standing out in awful weather for 6 hours and (c) prior cancellation would have meant a huge loss of revenue to the businesses of Stratford-on-Avon. The event, of course, was organised by the local Rotary Club.

Either way, cancellation of the marathon at such short notice was unnecessary and left a nasty taste. Won't be back there again, especially if Manchester is on the same day next year – they at least know how to manage in the rain!

Jim Manford April 30th 2012



Madrid Marathon 2012 by Malcolm Cox

Sun 22 April, I'm back in my favourite city, Madrid. This is my fourth visit so I know the place pretty well, however this time I'm off on a 42.2k sightseeing trip with a couple of friends and several thousand like minded complete strangers. Myself, Neil and Ashleigh from Sunderlnd Strollers were on marathon duty, another couple of Strollers were sensibly tackling the 10k, why can't I just be content with that distance? I must be wired up wrongly or something.

It's sunny, about 15C and there's a very light breeze, absolutely perfect weather, though judging by the attire of some of the locals who were sporting top coats and scarves, I think Madrid was still in the last throes of winter. They ought to try ours!

Anyway, back to the race. The marathon and 10k runners set off together, splitting up somewhere around 3.5k near the famous Estadio Santiago Bernabeu, home of Real Madrid. Running with Neil we kept it nice and steady for the first 10k, then gradually picked the pace up, going through halfway in 1.52.

By this time it was becoming more obvious that my drinking strategy was hopelessly wrong so at 22k I diverted to a row of portaloos which turned out to be sealed! A nearby tree spared my blushes then I spent the next 8k trying to catch Neil, without going mad and blowing it for the later stages. Well, the first part of that plan worked, in fact I overtook him, but sadly the second part didn't. From about 34k I was willing the km markers to appear, the fact that the course planners cunningly put all the hills in the last 10k didn't help.

By 38k I'd stopped to stretch, Neil appeared and then we were running together again. I say running but use the term loosely, and we had a short walk up one of the climbs which under normal circumstances would have hardly registered as a climb, but now took on Eiger-like proportions.

Rallying gamely for the last few kms, we finished together in 3.50.40, happy but exhausted, and delighted to learn that the other marathon runner in our party, Ashleigh, had stormed to a pb of 3.30.12.

I have to say, this was a marathon well worth doing, the atmosphere was good, Spaniards don't really need an excuse to be noisy, but the crowds were great, with shouts of Vamos! and Arriba! etc. throughout. The organisation was first class, there were some good bands playing along the route, roller skating first-aiders in the latter stages dispensing vaseline and deep heat sprays etc., a decent goody bag (could do with a choice of t-shirt size instead of just large though!) and some good sights along the way. Not to mention that there can be no better city for refuelling, on tapas and beer of course!

Highly recommended, Muchas gracias!

Manchester marathon April 29th 2012

This was the first marathon in Manchester for 10 years and the organisers had promised that it would be bigger and better than ever. Despite the high price (£44) and the inconvenience of having to register by 6pm the day before, I decided that this race would suit me, being fast and flat and nearer to home than the other marathons on that day.

I don't like running in hot weather, so I wasn't too daunted by the forecasts of persistent heavy rain and strong winds. Ignoring all the runners in vests and shorts I donned full winter gear and left a complete set of warm dry clothes in the baggage tent. The young cadets who were manning the tent didn't seem to have much of a system going as we handed over our bags, but I assumed they would have plenty of time to sort them while we were running.

The first few miles flew by quite happily: we were getting wet but I was almost too warm for a while. I started some way back, but soon caught the 3.45 pacer. I was hoping for around 3.40 and since I never manage negative splits planned to see how 3.30 pace felt for as long as possible. The 3.30 pacer came into view and I kept him in sight for several miles. It was quite restful to stop looking obsessively at my Garmin and just follow the group. This was all going extremely well and the wind was largely behind us. The support from the crowds was great: my personal favourite was the child who shouted out '39th girl' as I ran past (not entirely accurate, but very encouraging). The drink stations were well stocked with gels, energy drinks, Shot-Bloks and water in fancy Scandinavian pouches which don't trip you up the way bottles do (but do squirt water up your nose if you haven't mastered the art of using them). I must be rather slow at drinks stations, as I lost ground on the pacing group at each one. I still reached the half-marathon point in under 1.45, so I decided to rely on my own pacing after that.

Between 14 and 15 miles we went through Dunham Park and along what some runners have described on the Runners World forum as the 'cross-country section' which 'caused injuries' and involved running through a 'lake'. I don't know which way those runners went, but the muddy little lane with a few puddles on it didn't seem all that dramatic to me. Then of course we turned north and into the wind. I didn't fight it and aimed for consistent effort rather than consistent pace. With the rain blowing into my face I could barely see my watch anyway. I plodded on, slowing slightly but overtaking more and more runners as I neared the finish. I crossed the line in a gun time of 3.38.52 feeling delighted with my run.

The toughest part of the day was still to come. I don't want to dwell too long on 'baggage-gate' or sound too melodramatic: let's just say that I was one of the relatively lucky ones. I only shivered for around 40 minutes before locating my bag of warm clothes in a heap outside the tent, I had only lost one item of clothing from the bag and none of my things had been trampled into the mud. Many locals had given up and gone home without their bags, people had lost train tickets, money and keys and some were found crying and bewildered with incipient hypothermia. Let's get back to the positive side! My chip time was 3.37.39, safely within my target and the fastest I had run since 2005. I was actually 55th 'girl' and amazingly 3rd FV50. My other favourite statistic is that I had moved up 153 places in the last 6 miles, to finish in 838th place overall. 8000 runners had entered, 4579 had started and 4505 had finished.

Would I do it again? I had a mainly positive experience and in milder weather everyone could have enjoyed it. Many aspects of the race were really well organised and given the outcry I imagine the organisation in the baggage tent will be impeccable next year. The jury's out for now – it might help if they get all our lost property back to us as they have rashly promised!

Liz Sowter

GENEVA MARATHON May 6th 2012

No disrespect to the former, but with a choice this weekend between the streets of Sunderland and the shores of Lake Geneva, George and I found a couple of cheap flights to Switzerland and settled for the scenic option.

The City Hostel in Geneva had been recommended to us as a reasonably priced alternative to expensive accommodation costs in what must be the most expensive city in Europe. With beer at £6.50 a pint and a basic hamburger costing £10, the nearby LIDL allowed us to make full use of the hostel's self-catering facilities. The rooms and showers were spotless, with the only drawback to our stay being the customary gaggle of mindless, British lager louts whose idea of a "fun" involved endless tribal football chanting well into the middle of the night before the race.

Although expensive, Geneva is none-the-less very generous to it's visitors, providing everyone with free public transport on it's buses, trams and boats for the duration of their stay. We spent most of Saturday riding the trams out to various parts of the French border before returning to the city for a few free cruises on the Lake. There was also a series of local races on the afternoon, all part of the marathon weekend, to keep everyone amused.

Registration and the Marathon Exhibition in the lakeshore Jardins Anglais proved a disappointment with few exhibitors and a strange pre-race goody bag containing a badly designed tee-shirt, (what was on the front should have been on the back and vice-versa), a 300 ml. bottle of shampoo, (useless for taking home on a plane) and 2, (empty!) water bottles. We declined the 500ml bottle of Ariel on offer. This was the 8th edition of the marathon and for the past 2 years the start has been moved out of the city to the suburb of Chene-Bourg, a 15 minute tram ride away. With the race starting at 8.30am this meant an early morning wake-up call for last night's lager boys before we headed off to the start line. Approx. 1300 of us set off in the main race with another 4000 or so in the 10.30am Half Marathon event. The thunderstorms of the previous evening had left a mugginess in the air that intensified as the sun came out and heated things up. Surprisingly, this turned out to be more of a rural than an urban marathon, as the course took us on almost a 20 mile loop, through backroads and farmland between the mountains and the Lake, with several off-road sections through muddy fields. Worst of all was the bit where the fresh-legged half marathoners merged into us at speed on a narrow, congested farm track as exhaustion was beginning to set in after 17 miles.

The last 6 miles took us finally down to and along the Lake shore, across a bridge at it's head, through the town and then back again on the other side of the Lake via a beautiful park, containing the HQ of the World Trade Centre. We then re-crossed the Lake over the iconic Pont du Mont Blanc to finish in the, by now, over-crowded Jardins Anglais to be handed one of the weirdest medals I've ever seen – imagine a giant piano tuning fork and you won't be far wrong!

Uninspiring tee-shirts and medals aside, the race was superbly organised – I'd expect nothing less for a £70, (yes!) entry fee. Marshals and drink stations were plentiful throughout – 9 in total with loads of bananas, gels, water and an unidentifiable pear tasting mixture that might, or might not, have been isotonic. At the finish there were tables of food galore for those with enough strength left to fight themselves to the front of the queue – I just went back to the hotel! Would I do it again? Probably not, though I would like to revisit Geneva – perhaps en-route to a different marathon in Switzerland - either Zurich or Lausanne.

Jim Manford May 8th 2012

By the Jet D'Eau at the Finish



Belfast Marathon – May 2012 by Ian Richardson

“The rain it poored, aal the day”.

So begins the last verse of the Blyadon Races and it would have been fairly appropriate here too. It is what was forecast and I dressed accordingly, including a recently reproofed jacket.

When I last did this marathon, the old course had been tweaked to make it flatter and faster. It also made it a bit dull and attracted a lot of complaints from local worthies who wanted it to go through their area. This year’s course seemed to have gone back to those origins, with a lot being the same, but also a lot of twisty, windy bits through the suburbs.

I had been warned that it was a hilly course, but I didn’t think it was. Mind you, after my recent failed attempt on the Paris Eco-Trail, I may never look at a hill again in the same light.

There are two races in one, with about 3,500 doing the full marathon and a little more than that doing each of the 5 legs of the marathon relay. This meant that you always had some irritatingly bouncy and fresh people around you even after 20+ miles, when the last leg of the relay started. The course started outside the City Hall and finished in Ormeau Park. On the way it headed out of town towards the City airport, then back in for a tour of the suburbs, with those delightful murals on house gable ends, for which Belfast has become well known. Happily the unpleasantness often reflected in these murals seems a little quaint now, rather than threatening, and the support on the course was always warm and friendly, despite very inhospitable conditions.

Having left the Falls Road behind, we headed towards and north up Antrim Road, which didn’t seem noticeably hilly to me. I do, however, recall at the 10 mile point, that I seemed to have put a lot of effort in to get there. This feeling lasted through the turnaround point and on to the cycle path after Gideon’s Green at about 16 miles.

It was here that we ran on a cycle path next to the Motorway, (much nicer than it sounds), but were exposed to the howling gals off the Laggan to our left. I really began to feel the benefit of my clothing choice by now and could see people around me suffering.

After a mile or so of being blown sideways, we were afforded a screen of trees between us and the wind, which made a huge difference and coincided with a distinct uplifting of both my spirits and energy levels. Happily, this feeling lasted to the end as we headed back south into town and along the towpath to Ormeau Park.

All along the way, there were drinks stations about every two miles, sometimes closer together than that, which saved having to carry anything. From about half way onwards most of the drinks stations were also offering a bright blue Powerade and some also had High 5 gels. The staff at these stations were unflaggingly friendly and encouraging.

The blemishes on the event came immediately after the finish. I picked up my medal, bottle of water and packet of crisps (yes, that was it) and was then engulfed in broolly wielding spectators, as there was insufficient separation of the two. Fortunately I had decided not to take a bag of clothes and when I saw the queue to get into the tennis centre to access them, I was happy with my decision. I have since read of runners waiting an hour to get to their bag. I’m only surprised that there was not a high number of hypothermic runners as a result. For me, I asked two different officials how to get to the shuttle bus back to town as there were no signs. I received two conflicting answers and finished up having to walk a mile instead of a few hundred yards.

I also still seem to have my chip as there was nowhere signposted to hand it in. I guess I’ll have to post it back to them.

These finish area problems were minor but important and avoidable blots on an otherwise very good and well organised event, which I would do again.

Ian Richardson
08 May 2012

DRURIDGE BAY MARATHON May 20th 2012

Rather than write out yet another Race Report of the "I started so I finished" variety I thought I'd let a selection of the unsolicited comments from those present on the day describe how things went.

I ran this race yesterday and just wanted to get in touch to praise and thank everyone involved in organising the event.

I recently ran the Marathon of the North and felt very disappointed and let down with that run, the subsequent fortnight of rest and recovery has been very frustrating and I needed something to remind me why I love running so much, thankfully you guys provided that yesterday.

Gorgeous run, stunning weather, friendly & supportive volunteers and a great stretch of beautiful coastline, fantastic!

I'll be back next year. Thanks again.

Tim Nicholson

Hi Jim, just to say a big thank you to you and all of your team for organising such a great race yesterday. It was a lovely course, with varied scenery so I was never bored. The marshals were really supportive, every one of them gave me words of encouragement each time I passed them, which really helped. Thanks also for arranging such perfect running weather! This was my first foray into events organised by the North East Marathon Club and it definitely won't be my last. It was like a breath of fresh air. I am disappointed to see that I have missed the Northumberland Coast Marathon, but have booked in already for Hamsterley.

Please pass on my thanks to your team

Regards

Ros Blackmore

Thanks for a fantastic race Jim. I loved it last year, but this year it was even better. The mixture of running surfaces were great, and the course looping past the drinks station twice per lap was great. The beach part was my favourite. As usual the marshals were fantastic, firstly for turning up and watching us run round in circles for 6 hours, and secondly for their motivating cheering on the way round. It was good having the half marathon and attracting more runners, it was very sociable at the finish line! I have finally met my ambition of running a sub 3:30, and I have every confidence that it was down to my super fast new club vest!

Thanks again,

Melanie Horan.

I just wanted to thank you and your team for organising such a first class marathon today - great varied route and showed up well in the glorious weather.

Can you also pass on my thanks to the marshals, those who help at the drinks stations, and the other runners that made this a friendly and well organised event. The marshals were particularly supportive on what must have been a long day for them.

Michael Grehan

Dunstable Road Runners

I just want to thank you for a great day of running today ☺ It was v well organised and a pleasure to be part of. I know you put a lot of effort into making the race the success it was. The half marathon has really boosted my confidence and I felt I had a smashing run. I haven't run a half marathon for 1.5yrs!! I PROMISE I will do a marathon with the club in the future!!
Happy Running Jane Eastham

First off, thanks for a great event on Sunday. Excellent course, well marked and brilliantly marshalled.

You did well sorting the weather out as well ;-) Jo Reed

Many thanks for a great race, Jim. I'm looking forward to more of the same at Hamsterley.
Darren Rowe

Thanks to all concerned for a great day out yesterday, I really enjoyed the route and Susan says she enjoyed her day, just as well the weather was good! A nice lunch and a couple of pints at the Widdrington Inn rounded things off nicely Malcolm Cox

Thank you once again for putting on my first marathon! Well organised and, despite the trouble you had, a great success in my opinion. It was a shame it was my first go at the distance as I think I could have done a fair bit better given my rotten split of 1:35/2:04 - needless to say the first half felt great! (Know what to do next time) Bill Pikett Norham RC

Firstly, thanks for putting on yet another successful and very enjoyable event. You must have been a very righteous person this year as the sun always seems to shine on your events. Thanks also to George and everyone else who helped.
Cris Atwell

A brilliant day all round, thanks very much for organising it. I hope it wasn't me inadvertently cutting corners, if it was then I did worse than I thought! I really thought the half marathon idea worked well too. Please thank everyone involved, especially those standing at the remote points shouting encouragement, it really helped keep me going.
Thanks again
Rich Cutter

Thanks for a great day, not often you get sunburnt at Druridge Bay!
Steve Smith. St Albans Striders

Thoroughly enjoyed the race yesterday, despite being slightly under the weather. It was good to get a bit of sun on the face at last and the marshalls were as ever great all along the course.
Matt Cawood

Many thanks to yourself and the marshals for a fantastic run and great friendly encouragement. Thoroughly enjoyed my day and this run has risen to just about the top of my favourite run lists. You also did great to organise perfect weather!
Chris Sumsion

I'd just like to thank you for a great Marathon last Sunday at Druridge Bay, what a great event ! please pass on my thanks to all the marshals and people on the drink station, oh and the weather wasn't bad too !!! Really enjoyed the day just pleased to get around as did Marathon Of The North two weeks before .
See you at Hamsterley for the next one.
Thanks again for all your hard work
Michael Lloyd

I could go on –there were lots more, all of them positive with not a negative comment among them yet! However, I think you get the picture by now – after a month of rain the weather turned up trumps on the day and the runners were able to enjoy the beautiful surroundings on a very scenic course. It's very reassuring to know that there are fellow marathoners out there who share the Club's philosophy of low-key, low-cost, scenic marathons without the frills, the fuss, the hype and, of course, the expense of some of these big city affairs.

Jim Manford
May 21st 2012

Dukeries Ultra 30 mile 26/5/2012 by Ian Richardson

This was the first running of this 30 miler, with a 40 mile option. Run mostly in Sherwood Forest, green tights and caps worn at a jaunty angle were entirely optional but given the weather conditions, head cover was most important, especially for those of us who now have insufficient natural covering.

I travelled down the previous evening with Stevie Matthews and saw some other club members at the start.

A nice touch on picking up our numbers in the local YHA, was a pile of sachets of sun tan cream, very thoughtful.

We set off at 9a.m., about 50 of us in the 30mile event (31 by my garmin) and just over 70 hardy souls in the 40 mile event.

We were straight off into woods, which often provided valuable cover from a very hot sun. The nature of this sort of event meant that it was more of a run for most of us, than a race, and as such was very friendly.

The first checkpoint came at 6 miles and then similar intervals thereafter, with the 40 mile race splitting off at 20 mile for a 5 mile out and back before rejoining the 30 mile course for the last 10 miles.

The checkpoints were well enough supplied with water, bananas, flap jacks and jaffa cakes, except the third one which had no food, and there were no cups at at least one checkpoint. Neither is an issue if you are expecting it, but when you are told that there will be certain items, you come to expect them.

Maps and written instructions, like for an LDWA event, were provided, and essential, as the course marking veered between poor and non-existent. For a LDWA style event, this is fine, but for an event designed by runners for runners, my own feeling is that you shouldn't have to navigate, but just follow tape and arrows. The organisers have taken all of the comments on board and I am confident that this aspect will be much improved next year.

After the 20 mile checkpoint and the splitting off of the 40 milers, it was quiet and I covered the last 10miles in the company of David Cremins of the NEMC and I think that we helped each other at various times during that run in.

The finish was past the YHA and down to the village hall for soup, rolls, tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits and the memento was a mug or a decent technical T-shirt.

Almost the entire course was on very good running surfaces, with only the occasional field edge. It was also mostly flat to undulating, allowing for a good rhythm to be built up.

This was about the furthest that I have run and I was pleased to be still going strongly at the end.

This really was a very good event, and with a few organisational tweaks, is likely to get better with the passing of the years. I would certainly recommend it as a run, and for those wishing to dip their toes into the world of ultra running.

Ian Richardson

EDINBURGH MARATHON 27TH MAY 2012

Well, let's get the complaints over at the start. I paid £6 in advance to park in the official car park at Musselburgh race course. This was only open until 7.30 a.m. so I left home at 5 picking up my Alnwick Harrier colleague Sarah on the way. When we got to Musselburgh, all main roads around the race course were already closed even though it was still before 7 a.m. When we eventually found our way through the un-signposted backstreets to the race course we found that the gate to the car park was still locked although there was a very sheepish looking marshal making profuse apologies. We eventually found a place to park and took the first bus to Edinburgh that came along.

Although it had been misty and cold when we left Alnwick, by 9 o'clock the sun was up and the temperature was already on the rise. I knew I was in for another tough day in the sun following on from the previous weekend's marathon at sunny Druridge Bay.

Sure enough, by 10 miles I was already starting to feel fairly heavy legged. I was hoping it was just a bad spell which I suppose it was but it lasted for the next sixteen miles. My spirits were lifted at seventeen miles by the rather surprising sight of Ian Singer and Suzy Hunter standing at the side of the road with a plate load of custard creams. I'm not sure if this is the food of marathon runners but at least it took the taste of sweat out of my mouth for a few minutes.

Anyway, the temperature continued to go up and I continued to slow down. My splits were 1.48 for the first half and 2.01 for the second so you can guess how much I enjoyed the last 10 miles or so.

Edinburgh is not my favorite marathon course as, although it is flat, I find the long straight sections, of which there are many, very dull. The long stretch past the power station on the return leg is soul destroying when you are tired and desperately in need of something to take your mind off what you are doing. Having said that, the support from the crowd in the last mile through Musselburgh was fantastic. Hats off to those who stood out in the sun and cheered for hours on end.

Having finished, I sought out Sarah who had trained for months to try to break 3.30 for the first time. When I found her she looked terrible and spluttered out that she had run 3.30.14. I could have cried.

I was reasonably pleased with my time of 3.49 as I had never run marathons on successive weekends before and had visions of 4.30 or thereabouts.

I've done Edinburgh twice now but doubt I will be rushing back to do it again. For £50 I just expect something better. The organization was much more efficient than it was on my last visit in 2009 but it still could be better. Isotonic drinks at some of the drink stations would be nice instead of just water. Overall score, seven out of ten.

Anyway, next stop for me is Hamsterley. Looking forward to it already.

Cris Atwell 29.5.12

The Wales Marathon. June 10th 2012.

Having failed to complete my last marathon in Geneva within the allotted time five weeks previously, it was always going to be a tough ask to get 'round the Tenby marathon course in one piece

The seven hour drive to Tenby was quite a challenge too – braving torrential rain and poor driving conditions through a mass of surface water and spray. Thankfully we avoided the flooding and closed roads in East Wales that weekend which was widely reported in the national press and TV.

Fortunately the weather had improved enough to enjoy a pleasant evening exploring the historic as well as the quaint seaside resort sites of Tenby. The whole town was awash with visitors due to the fact that Tenby was hosting “The Long Course Weekend” – The Wales Swim (1.9km & 3.8km courses), The Wales Sportive (40 mile, 72 mile & 112 mile bike rides) and the Wales Marathon and Half Marathon as well as a multitude of kids beach races.

Registration in De Valance (the Town Hall) was easy to find and well organised providing a free cotton race T shirt, number and timing chip. The event exhibition had just over a dozen stands and catered mainly for the swimmers and cyclists competing in the triathlon weekend.

The weekend's proceedings got underway with a spectacular launch of the Tenby RNLI Lifeboat at 6.30pm on Friday evening followed by the mass start of the long & short course swim around buoys in Tenby North Beach Bay

Saturday featured the multi lap bike rides and with riders passing through the town and finishing in the town's Tudor Square throughout the day it gave the place a real holiday festival feel about it. In the afternoon we took the train to have a look around picturesque Pembroke - which was the location of the half marathon start and the half way point in the following day's marathon. It was warm and sunny – a million miles away from the horrendous heavy rain and conditions about to confront those back in Newcastle getting ready to run “The Blaydon”.

Sunday turned out to be warm and sunny again in contrast to the local forecast and I quickly decided to change to shorts and vest. With just over 450 in the marathon the narrow uphill start didn't cause any problems, neither did the sharp twisting turns taking us through almost a mile of all the quaint little cobbled streets, lanes, promenades and alleyways in the town. It wasn't long before we headed out on the main road before turning right into the countryside. It was reassuring to know that all the roads ahead of us were closed to traffic. Most of the first half of the course was along The Ridgeway – a road which was reached by a climb between miles 3 and 4. The next 7 miles was classed as undulating – always a worrying term! The drop down to the ponds and bridge at Pembroke Castle was most welcome and after the short rise to the main street there followed a few miles of fairly flat quiet country lanes. Magnificent views of the coastal cliffs and the town of Freshwater East appeared on the right which soon led to the very very steep downhill road to Manorbier Beach and the long climb past the imposing Castle. After a brief respite it was time to drop down the valley under the railway line and face the climb back onto The Ridgeway to head back the way we came from Tenby. Just one more hill lay ahead up and under the railway viaduct which thankfully led directly to the seafront and the awaiting crowds at the Tudor Square finish line. I was outside the allotted finished time but I finished and that was the main thing. It was one of toughest marathons I've done (something not mentioned in their brochures) but one I would recommend – not just for the superb organisation, the closed roads, the magnificent scenery, the support of the marshals, drinks & council staff but because of the challenge in excellent surroundings.

George Routledge June 2012



Karrimor Trail Marathon 17th June 2012

A new "local" marathon was added this year, sponsored by Karrimor and described as a difficult yet scenic off road marathon it certainly didn't disappoint.

Susanne and I travelled to Keswick for this one. The day included a number of other races including male and female senior and junior international trail races, this included Steve Vernon and Andi Jones. In addition there were 10 km, Half Marathon and Full Marathons, so plenty of choice for everyone. Just over 900 competed/completed overall on the day.

We decided to do this about a week ago; having done four marathons before this one this year and many others previously we were confident that we could just add this one in! I can honestly say that neither I nor Susanne have ever done anything as difficult and demanding as this.

The course was mainly off road, most of which was on trails, this was fine until you are hit with the mountains of the lakes which simply put you cannot even consider running up. I suspect that perhaps only the winner ran only some of these. To give an idea we probably had 5 miles of leaning forward, pushing your legs with your arms type of hill walking! Coupled with a lumpy course to start with and the distance of 26.7 miles, it wasn't going to be a easy day!

To compare it with anything that we have done, if you said say Edinburgh is flat, Druridge is off road and flat, Tynedale 10 mile is a bit lumpy, Kielder is hilly I will give you that one as its "worth" about 20 mins of my marathon pace, this one is off the scale! The winner did it in 3:22 a whopping 35 mins slower than his best of last year.

The weather was good for running, but really cold on the top of the hills, we have 2 long then 2 short loops to do, if we didn't do a small pre loop at the start I think the distance would have been a lot closer to the true marathon distance, however in an off road marathon you can actually call it a marathon if its over 26 miles long. There was plenty of water etc en route and the marshals were mainly local cadets who were very enthusiastic. We ran in road shoes, most others ran in trail or fell shoes and they were mainly from clubs such as Border Harriers and say Ilkley in Yorkshire, all hilly places to train. As one official said as we passed "Well done Blyth, I hope your beach training helps you!"

Overall we kept an even pace on the running parts, some had gone off too fast and a small number simply dropped out after 1 lap or so. Injuries seemed to take their toll too on occasions. This one wasn't for the faint hearted!!

At the end of the day we came in 13th and 14th, with Susanne in a great 2nd placed lady, the winning lady had caught up with us at about half way and explained that she had hill trained for 8 weeks and was off to win this one. Oh yes and she was 27 years old!!!!

This was a very well organised event, I'm sure they are looking to expand it for future years, most people we spoke to afterwards said "Never Again", no doubt we will be back next year. Mrs Hunter has a 27 year old to beat!

Iain Singer
June 2012

The Wall Ultra Marathon 69 miles Carlisle to Newcastle 22/06/2012

For me the inaugural Wall Ultra, on paper at least, seemed like the logical choice for a first go at a decent length Ultra. It starts in Carlisle and finishes at the Newcastle Quayside, so getting home wouldn't be too much trouble. You can choose from a selection of options to cover the 69 mile route. 'Experts' would attempt the route in one day, 'challengers' take two days with an overnight camp at Vindolanda, and 'relay' teams could be teams of between 2 and 4 who would take it in turns to do the different stages across the route. I plumped for the 'expert' choice and decided to up my training. Organised by quite a big group, 'RatRace' put on quite a lot of ultra's and adventure type runs and cycling events all over the UK. They seem pretty well organised, but it comes with a price tag – the one day run cost £150!!

However, for that you got a fully way marked run all the way from Carlisle, no navigation necessary, which seemed like a good idea when I expected my brain as well as my legs to have turned to jelly by the 50 mile mark. And I liked the idea of finishing near home.

The route started at Carlisle Castle at 7.30am (after a half hour delay) on the very wet and windy morning of June 22nd. Around 250 runners formed the expert group, carrying all manner of equipment that was stipulated by the race organisers – wind proofs, first aid, 1000ml of water, head torch from the half way mark etc etc (you got to drop a half way bag to meet you at 32 miles with anything you might want – within reason).

The route was easy to follow, fully way marked, across a mixture of roads, tarmac paths, trails and off road. Quite demanding at times, considering it essentially followed Hadrian's Wall I suppose it was to be expected and made just that little bit harder by the weather.

Fully loaded checkpoints were at every 15 miles or so, offering a range of sweets, sandwiches, cakes and snacks, juice and water and shelter! Between the check points there were also water points every 5 or 6 miles. I met my half way bag at the mid-point with the original intention of changing clothes, putting on some dry socks and refuelling before setting out on the home stretch as fresh as a daisy. However, The ground was so wet, and the weather constantly changing that putting dry stuff on to immediately get soaked seemed pointless, so instead I just carried on, forgoing the hot soup that was on offer

Loads of support along the way from crew and public alike, coming through Hexham, Newburn and finally along the quayside just after 9 o'clock on Saturday evening was a great way to finish, getting back to familiar territory. The Crew at each checkpoint were really supportive and really seemed to appreciate what you were going through. Being met by a camera man with a microphone asking you how it went at the end seemed a bit glamorous, quick photo and then a hot meal and a drink laid on at the finish.

All in all a very demanding but enjoyable run. The furthest I've done in one go. Would I do it again? Well my only disappointment was that I wasn't in any shape to do the Hamsterley Marathon the following week. The goody bag was ok, decent T shirt, but not much else and the medal was relatively poor considering the rest of the event. Seems like a lot of money for a run at £150, but having said that, the support and way marking etc for 250 runners must have been some effort.

There is also challenger option and relay, previously mentioned, which both do the course over two days following the same route. The cost for these is slightly different and involves overnight camping at the mid-point, which on any other weekend might have been quite pleasant, but this year the mid-point was a quagmire, so I didn't envy anyone stopping there over night. There were approximately another 600 people doing some variance of the two day event. If the memory of the pain fades, I might be there next year

Richard Cutter (legs still not quite right) 05/07/2012

