Hexham Racecourse Marathon

This was the toughest race I’ve run. “It was more like an ultra!” said the Bloke Just Behind Me at the finish. Pete and I weren’t going to disagree. This was a Personal Worst, 46 minutes and 47 seconds over four hours. Pete was slow too. He just lapped me, coming round me on his last lap of the home turn. He finished some 18 minutes ahead of me – an indication of how it took me to run, well, walk-and-run that last lap. But this was the race I’m most proud to have finished and, in many ways, one of the best I’ve done.

 My time might’ve been the slowest of my 13 marathons, but the setting was second to none. Hexham Racecourse bills itself as the most scenic in the country and, of those I’ve seen, I wouldn’t disagree. From nowhere on the course (and believe me, after 19 laps I know the course as well as any nag that’s raced round it!) did I see a road, just rolling hills which the sun struggled to rise far above. It was as if the wind, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *Jekyll and Hyde* (Year 10 set book we’re doing at the moment), had “tilted” the sun. It did that and more to me!

 The race info described the ambulance track as “smooth” – which I misinterpreted as “flat”. Memo to self: there’s a big difference. As with most race courses, the buildings and stands, including the bar where we registered and were briefed – “follow him to the start, it’s a bit of walk” (that was it!) – were close to the top of the course. We ran anti-clockwise, the direction the horses race. The home straight was a long one, uphill, and into That Wind.

 Pete had picked me up soon after 5.30. The drive up was easy, despite Pete’s sat-nav taking us straight up the A1 to Newcastle. We wondered whether we’d be able to reach Hexham on the A69 before the floods blocked the road. Cumbrian has been soaked, again. Ten years on, Brunton Park is underwater and the poor folk of the Warwick Road face months out of their homes. Bryan told me water in the rugby club was eight feet up the walls. It’ll be six months, he reckons, before they’re back in.

 We managed to avoid the floods, though there were some pond-like puddles on the back road to the racecourse. We were the second car to arrive. In the first was an *ultra* Ultra from Wales who’d run a 48-hour race indoors in Norway! I doubt if any runner would’ve made it from the west – the flooding’s that bad. I counted 20 of us at the start on the far side, including the chap who walked us over. The wind was at our back as we walked down the home straight. It was cold as well as strong.

 “If you want to warm up, you’ve got a minute or two,” the marathoneer who’d led us to the start said. Only a couple did so, and even then it seemed rather half-hearted. With 18.75 laps and 19 runs up the finishing straight ahead, most of us saved our legs.

I’d worked out the night before target times for 19 laps at 4 hours 15 pace. I had them written on the back of an envelope, and though I looked at it at the end of two, four and six laps, I didn’t bother from then on. Not that I minded not knowing how fast, er, slow I was going. It was obvious from early on this wasn’t going to be a fast one – not with that climb. Not with that wind.

There was no respite at all on the home straight. The wind whipped you round the bottom corner, as if it were giving you a helping hand at the start, but once we’d straightened up – WHAM! There it was. *In your face, Runner!* The volunteers counting our laps moved fairly quickly from the side of the straight, to lee-ward side of the porter loos, to the shelter of one of the hurdles. There was no escape for those supplying drinks and jelly babies. Anything less than a full cup was blown off the table.

If the race was tough for us runners, at least we were moving and keeping warm. The wind was a lazy one, as my granddad used to say: “it doesn’t bother with blowing around you, it just goes straight through.” Utmost respect and thanks to those volunteers.

Crossing the finishing line at the end of each lap was a double treat. First, because I could tick off another: *one done… two done… three done…* Second, because I’d take a jelly baby, which would last to the turn at the top of the hill. The wind was at its most vicious at the top but, looking at life through half-full glasses, for every struggle uphill there’s a liberating charge down. Even on *17 done… 18 done…* it would have been criminal not to have enjoyed running downhill. I’d forced my legs to take me to the top turn. I owed it to them to enjoy the descent.

And so it went on. And on. Eighteen and a bit times. What with the view, the wind, the uphill and downhill, it wasn’t anything like as monotonous as I expected. An orange jelly baby at the top of the downhill became a familiar feature, as did the two strides of concrete either side of a drain cover at the foot of the home straight. Pete said he befriended a twig – “I stepped on it each lap.”

According to the results, 74 of us were running, but over three different distances. That meant the quick lads and lasses in both the half and full marathon passed me at regular intervals. I overtook a few of the slower half-marathon runners, and, more than once, a friendly couple who must’ve been doing the marathon – one of whom seemed to be doubling up as the race photographer.

I did puff a word or two of encouragement, and others did the same as they passed me, but what with the wind and the effort of will, there wasn’t much craick around me.

After *11 done* laps (i.e. 10 and a bit, about 15 miles) I walked for the first time, from the finishing portaloos – there wasn’t a line as such – to the last hurdle at the top of the hill. After *14 done* laps (20 miles) I first walked at the bottom of the home straight. From there on in it was walk/run/walk.

The thought of not finishing the race never seriously crossed my mind. When it did, I simply crossed it out. Yes, it was hard, blinking hard, but each lap there was a sense of achievement: “I’ve done it! I’ve done it again! I’ve got to the top and WHEEE! Here comes the downhill!”

Pete, who’d pulled up at the end of the ‘bit’ four hours earlier to go to the loo, overtook me just a lap later and, with just half the home straight to go, lapped me on my last lap. He waited at the finish for me to come round again. That’s comradeship for you!

On that last lap I found myself in a race, because the lad in front, a black-vested runner with his name capitalised on the back – SMITH – who passed me soon after Pete did, stopped for a pee on the downhill. I took the opportunity to run, for the last time, down the hill. And, what the heck, even round some of the bottom turn too and, again, into That Wind of the home straight. Seeing Pete clapping me in (the wind was that strong I couldn’t hear the claps) inspired me to keep running, to keep clear of The Bloke Behind.

I didn’t want to keep Pete waiting in the cold longer, but I did want to thank the counters and volunteers. SMITH had beaten me to it. This was a friendly field indeed. He chatted to us as we headed for the bar. Indeed, it was he who said “it was more like an ultra.”

Another wonderful volunteer was pouring coffees and teas, and the counter of the bar was heavy with crisps, biscuits, chocolate. There was a further surprise when as well as a medal, we were handed a woolly hat as race mementos. Most of my race medals don’t matter much anymore; I give them out as rewards in class. Not so my marathon medals, which I hang on the back of a chair at the dining table, so I can hear them jangle and think: “I’ve done that!”

I like mugs as mementos but the woolly NEMC hat was even better. And better than that was the heavy presentation box pressed into my hands as I waited for my cuppa. I’d won my V55 marathon category. Okay, so I was probably the only V55 runner, but a trophy is a trophy – and this was a tasteful one too.

As it happened, when race organiser Melanie (one place ahead of me, as it happened) sent out the results, she told me that I had won the category outright because the Ultra Ultra whom we’d met earlier had dropped down from the 50k race to the marathon. And I’d beaten him!

I’d well and truly shattered my Personal Worst for a marathon, but I couldn’t have been happier or, like I said, more proud. I was, and am, extremely grateful to Melanie, the NEMC and those wonderful volunteers. Proof of how much I enjoyed myself came 48 hours later when I pressed ‘SEND’ on my £8 NEMC membership fee. There’s a Members Only Marathon in February – and I don’t want to miss out on that!