Leas 2016

Comments from the front, or the back of the race.

February 2016 saw the North East Marathon Club host their members’ only marathon race at the Leas in South Shields, 26.2 miles of running up and down the coast. In 2016 the club opened this gem of a race to anyone rather than keep it to ourselves. I can't decide whether I like this idea, I loved running just with friends but I also know how selfish it is to have an exclusive race along a great route. The route was pretty much the same as the previous 2 races, basically a shared path going north and south in the middle and a turning loop at each end. In 2016 the start and finish location moved to nearer the middle of the course from the northern turning loop in the last 2 races. I will come to the route description in more detail later.

I travelled back to the North East the night before leaving my boys half way through bath time. There is less chance of them trying to come with me if I escape when they are in the bath. An easy 185 mile drive I got 'home' at a decent time to chat with The Olds and get to bed on Saturday (in 2015 I left late and went to bed early Sunday morning, little things like this can make a difference). I haven't run a marathon since 2015 Leas marathon for various reasons. I was looking forward and also worried about the run.

My Sunday morning routine was a bowl of porridge and playing monopoly with my nephews before driving up to South Shields. I should know the quick way to get from th A19 to the start, I have run the Great North Run enough to be able to follow the route but I opted for the easy navigation of following the signs to the town centre and driving back south along the coast to the start. I had a stop about 1/3 down the northern loop to look to see how people were running. One advantage I had with my start time in the handicap race was able to use the earlier starters as a guide to what the race conditions are like.

when I got to the start area it was like a well oiled machine, runners passing through and suitable refreshed or filled with jelly babies, other runners warming up or changing in the club tent and George keeping everything calm and in order. I managed to see the 10:00 runners set off, then had time to chat and slowly get ready for my 11:00 start. at 10:45 the 10:00 runners had completed their first southern loop and were heading north. Various items of clothing were thrown into the tent prompting me to comment that it was more like a 26 mile strip tease for the volunteers.

A late comer having missed his start time arrived in a panic, thinking he had missed out and asking if he could still race. Not a problem for George, a couple of marks on the start list and he joined us in the 11:00 start. My race plan was to take the first lap steadily, and if the pace was OK to run with the 3:30 marathoners (I had declared to be 3:15), then for laps 2 to 4 to slowly get on target for 3:15. In 2015 this was also my plan that didn't work however in 2016 I had a secret weapon... I put my GPS watch on so I should know if I was going too fast. In 2015 I took off too fast for the second lap and paid for it by having to walk pretty much the last lap. This year I was planning to be more steady. For energy on the route, I had seen jelly babies and had a vague idea of an energy gel every 4 or so miles

So off we went.

It might be good to add a quick route description here. The route was split in 2 at Marsden Grotto and the start / finish area. Heading south along the 'yellow' footpath path, past Souter lighthouse (by coincidence it featured on one of my boys TV programmes 2 weeks earlier) to a split in the path taking the left path and then a very sharp right turn up to Souter the car park. Take a right out the car park and head north again joining the path we headed south along. Past the lighthouse again and you can see the start area. Pass through the start and then onto the northern loop following the yellow path again. Half way up there is a hedge to follow over a grass (mud?) path. Part way up you nearly get onto the track going south again but keep going north along the hedge line to a T junction with a path, take the left and follow the top of the quarry round to the road and Tarmac! Follow the road downhill to the Waterfront pub, and then head right, south again back towards the finish. The route south follows the cliff edge giving views over the Leas but also out to sea and the ships. This path winds its way south and again you can see the lighthouse from early in the return leg. This gives a target to aim for. Back to the start and then repeat 3 more times.

Where was I? Oh yes, we were just setting off. The weather was good, a light wind and a touch of rain making quite nice running conditions. We ran south, the late comer dropped to his pace early on which was perfect rather than trying to keep up with us and not being able to finish. We ran having an easy going chat for the first lap. At the start area it was quite busy. There were about 50 runners and I worked out that the start area after a lap or 2 should be seeing runners every 4 or 5 minutes = busy people and very good to be able to encourage each of us 8 times (2 times a lap for 4 laps) with the same friendly smiles each time. The northern loop is mentally tougher, it is a bit longer than the southern loop and mentally my mind was thinking "that’s it, no stopping until the end of the lap / race". Going north we dropped our pace to 3:30 pace, we had been going too fast up till then, and I should have been more controlled. Too fast at the start can ruin my time nearer the end.

From the field north there were more muddle puddles underfoot and if the whole race was like that trail shoes would have been better. As it was even though it is a trail marathon ordinary road shoes were good to wear. Kind of lucky since my trail shoes were now 170 miles away. At the end of the 1st lap I made my excuses and we both settled into our own pace to run the rest of the race. At the end of the 2nd lap I had got my average pace to be what I needed to finish in 3:15, this worried me that I had gone too fast in lap 2. As I passed people I knew I slowed down to say hello and maybe have a quick chat. I worked out if I did that then I would stop running at a silly pace and finish the race in good shape. This kept my average pace mostly on target.

I finished the race at just over 3:17, so about the same as 2015 but this year I felt a lot more comfortable at the end. I was happy with how I had run.

The race was similar to other years, we have had 3 races there, 1 very foggy, 1 was warmer and nice and 1 was almost perfect and all 3 have been good. Knowing a lot of the runners and passing them several times on the route gives the race some comfort that you are not being sent 26 miles away from the start with no back up and for me this year was a great race not having run a marathon for so long. For me having the start in the middle of the loop made the race mentally shorter even though 1 lap was the same distance wherever you start

Afterward the club held its AGM in a local pub (well, where else?). I was pretty confident that I was the fastest runner of the day but with a handicapped start you never know. In 2015 a runner in an earlier handicapped start had had a great race to be second fastest where on paper he should have been 15 minutes slower! This was confirmed at the AGM. It was nice to win, it was also nice to see at the AGM all the other runners who had done so much more than me last year being given awards for the number or marathons completed (25 and 50), prizes and series awards and so on. It is a personal satisfaction to take a token home to put on the shelf for being the winner but can be humbling to see how many runners can run many, many marathons in a year.

I'll finish with a quick foot note - getting from South Shields back towards Newcastle I navigated using the Great North Run route in reverse. Who needs sat-nav when you have that for route knowledge? I only went wrong on the other side of town, in an area I had never run through.