SYDNEY MARATHON September 21st 2014

This was the first of three marathons I’m running in Australia during an extended visit to my son Ross’ home in Manly in the Northern Beaches suburbs of Sydney. Two weeks of early morning running along Manly’s famous mile-long surf beach had me a bit more confident for this one. Registration for it was actually being held in the basement of the Sydney Town Hall, the building in which Ross works. Other than the fact that it allowed Mo and I to meet him for lunch, the registration process turned out to be a huge disappointment; the least said about which the better. I’ve already made my views clear on the marketing aspects to captive runners theme. This was the worst of the lot. I felt sorry for all those out-of-town entrants who’d been dragged into Sydney to what was basically an Asics’ shop, simply to be given a number with chip attached. There was nothing else there except Asics merchandise and a stall for some obscure Japanese marathon. Melbourne, an equally prestigious marathon but less costly marathon I’ll be running next month, had already posted out the same number/chip combination, meaning we could time our travel there to suit our own convenience and were not at the mercy of the race organizers. Given the $135 entry fee I’m sure Sydney could have afforded to absorb the postal costs too. The only positive feature about the Registration was the facility to leave baggage there for collection after the race.

Race day started cool and showery; a welcome change from what had been a very hot week. Our race numbers were meant to give us free public transport to the start under the famous Harbour Bridge. What the organizers had neglected to mention was the fact that, given the 7 am start, public transport on a Sunday for such an early hour was virtually non-existent from some of the outer suburbs. So, after a very expensive taxi ride we lined up under the bridge itself, a short stroll away from Luna Park, Sydney’s version of the Blackpool Pleasure Beach. A Half Marathon had already set off an hour earlier and, later that morning, a well-attended 9km Bridge Run plus a Family Fun Run were to leave from the same spot. Altogether there were over 35,000 runners in all four events with everyone wanting to make the most of being part of the once-a-year closure of the Bridge.

I’m not sure yet of the exact number of marathon participants, (I’d estimate 4,000 but I could be very wrong here) Whatever, unlike other big city marathons the course was designed to cope with the crowds and from the first few paces I never felt the discomfort of crowd pressure. From the harbour we ran up to and then along the iconic bridge. In many ways this reminded me of crossing the Tyne Bridge on the GNR, except that this bridge was much bigger, taller, longer and wider and just happened to be the recognizable symbol of the entire nation. Fortunately the original designers had had the forethought to construct an 8 lane highway across the bridge so there was ample room to dodge the numerous runners of all nationalities stopping suddenly to pose for the inevitable selfie. The views, both left and right, were tremendous with Kirribilli House, the official residence of the Prime Minister, appearing in the foreground and the Opera House, (where we were to finish), looking brilliant in the distance.

The route we were to take proved to be a marathon tourist’s dream, taking us past the best that Sydney has to offer, (and that’s quite a lot!) Leaving the Bridge at 4km we passed in front of the famous Circular Quay, the wharves where the gorgeous green and yellow ferries set out across the harbor in all directions. At 5km we turned into the beautiful Botanic Gardens around the headland of Farm Cove where the early settlers struggled to grow vegetables for the emerging colony. A magnificent white cruise ship, the Sea Princess, chose that moment to berth alongside the route. The views back across to the Opera House and Bridge were simply breath-taking. At 8km we passed the Domain, the private park of the early Governors of the state. 10km brought us alongside the huge Gothic-style St Mary’s Cathedral, back out on to Macquarie Street and through Hyde Park to a long, straight stretch south before zig-zagging our way past the Sydney Cricket Ground where Bradman made his famous 452 not out and England started the body-line controversy. At this point I was running and chatting with the Chairman of the Australian 100 Marathon Club who, on 229 marathons, was four ahead of me. The half-way mark was reached after several loops around Centennial Park and we then proceeded to head back towards the city. The route took us through the central business district, back past Circular Quay and through the once notorious Rocks area, the heart of historic, convict era Sydney, under the southern edge of the Bridge.

We were now at the 32km point and I’d been feeling comfortable up till now, maintaining an even 6min per kilometer pace throughout. The final out-and-back section around Dawes Point was somewhat disappointing with its lack of crowd support and, (for this course), unappealing scenery. In addition, the day had heated up considerably so the final few kilometers proved something of a slog. It was a tremendous feeling though to emerge at 41km at the International Passenger Terminal and run the final kilometer along the quay to the finish on the forecourt of the iconic Opera House, (where Ross had taken Mo and I to see the legendary Bob Dylan two weeks earlier) It was great too, to spot Mo, Ross and Hayley cheering me on along the final approach. I was well satisfied to have finished well under my 4hour 30 intended finish time on what had been a beautiful morning on an excellent course. Registration aside, my only criticism of the event was the lack of advertised gels at most of the drink stations after 20km – this could have had serious consequences in the heat for those who had planned their re-hydration strategy around their availability.

On finishing there was a dedicated Marathon Recovery Area under the Opera House’s steps where we were handed our medal and T-Shirt. There were also the usual freebies to be had. Nearby in the Botanic Gardens, a whole tented village had been erected, incorporating all sorts of food and drink stalls, including Manly’s local Four Pines Brewery, allowing runners and their families time to sit out in the sun and celebrate. It’s a long way to go for a run, I know – but I wouldn’t have missed it for the world!

Jim Manford

September 23rd 2014