Western Sydney Marathon

This was very much a case of “after the Lord Mayor’s Show” compared to the hype and excitement of its big city neighbour; the central Sydney Marathon of two weeks ago. Organized for the sixth time by Penrith City Council, the Western Sydney is held in the foothills of the Blue Mountains around the scenic grounds of the Sydney International Regatta Centre – where Redgrave and Pinsent created Olympic history in 2000. I was in Sydney at the time for the athletic events and never made it out to any of the rowing, but do recall the total respect afforded to the pair by the Aussie public – our traditional sporting enemies and never ones to normally appreciate a British victory. With fields in the hundreds as opposed to the tens of thousands, it’s one of those low-key, minimum fuss events that I much prefer. Its $65 entry fee also makes it one of the cheapest in Australia. The only downside was the race’s inaccessibility by public transport. We made the mistake of paying expensive taxi fares to get to the Friday afternoon Registration when we could just as easily have taken the free shuttle bus provided from Penrith station just before the Saturday morning start of the race.

There were actually four separate events on the day, (Full, Half, 5k and 10k), all with staggered start times with the marathon first off at 7am. I estimate that there were approximately 150 of us on the marathon start line but learned that there was a large number of DNFs. We were to run six 7km laps around the Regatta Centre with the first 2km of each lap being an up and down artificial loop outside the park before hitting the pancake-flat straight stretches along either side of the rowing course. Anyone who’s run the Robin Hood Marathon will know what it’s like to run around these man-made rowing lakes. The big concern for most of us was the weather – Sydney had just enjoyed its hottest September for 100 years and temperatures of 28 degrees were forecast on the day.

As things turned out, cloud cover kept conditions sensible for the first 2 laps. Once this burned off it got stinking hot and the best we could do was to keep taking a “runner’s shower” (pouring cold water over our hats), at each of the 4 drink stations each lap. The boredom of the long stretches was alleviated by the sparkling blue of the water and the magnificent views of the Blue Mountains ahead of us. An added bonus was that Mo was on hand to provide gels and drinks each lap.

For the second race in a row I managed to run most of the way at a steady 6 minute per kilometre pace, slowing to 7 minutes when the heat took hold, to finish well under my targeted 4hr 30. It was a great experience finishing in front of the Grandstand I remembered from the Sydney Olympics. We received a rather nice hat, a rather tacky medal and a very welcome Aussie BBQ at the end to conclude a thoroughly memorable day in the sun.

Jim Manford

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