

Ann Arbor MI by David Holmen
June 2013

On June 9, 2013, I ran the Ann Arbor Marathon. I didn't know much about this race before I signed up for it, but I had never qualified for Boston in Michigan before. As I looked at various marathons in Michigan, I saw several races that I would have loved to run, but they didn't fit into my schedule for this year. For example, the Grand Rapids Marathon conflicts with the Hartford Marathon, which I need to get a BQ in Connecticut. I also saw several interesting trail races, but they didn't have certified courses. The Ann Arbor Marathon has a certified course, and it fit into my schedule.

I studied a map of the course and looked at a few photos, but without knowing much about Ann Arbor, I still didn't have a good idea of what would be like. All I knew is that Ann Arbor is home to the University of Michigan and we would start and finish on campus. The expo was at the Briarwood Mall, so I booked a room in one of the many hotels that are near the mall. The expo was across a parking lot from my hotel.

I don't know what I was thinking when I made my travel plans. Although I usually stay two nights, this trip would have been a good candidate for flying home the day of the race. The race starts early (6:30), I was staying at a hotel where I could get a late checkout if I asked for it, and I could get a non-stop flight home in the mid-afternoon that would get me home before dinner. I also booked one of the earliest flights from Minneapolis to Detroit, even though there were other flights that would get me to Michigan on time. I must have been allowing time for a long drive. As it turns out, it only takes 25 minutes to drive to Ann Arbor from the Detroit airport. By the time I realized all this, it would have been expensive to change my flight. Oh, well. I used a vacation day that I could have saved for another race.

It's good that I got to Ann Arbor early. When I arrived, I realized I forgot to pack a pair of running shorts. I thought I packed them, but evidently I was in too much of a rush when I packed. Fortunately, I had time to look for shorts at the expo. Also, since the expo was at a mall, I could also look for shorts at the sports stores.

I was able to find a suitable pair of running shorts, but I couldn't find any in my size that would match my Marathon Maniac singlet. Now that they've served their purpose, these shorts will be relegated to training runs. At least they were reasonably priced.

After washing the shorts in the hotel sink and hanging them up to dry overnight, I still had some time before dinner, so I drove to campus to see where the race would start and finish. I'm very glad I did. Although it's only a few miles away and looks like an easy drive, it wasn't as simple as I thought. Now I have a better understanding of where the term "Michigan left" comes from. Left turns are not allowed at many of the intersections, so you sometimes need to turn right and make a U turn. Throw in several intersections where U turns aren't allowed, plus construction on State St., and I ended up taking quite a circuitous route.

After finding the start, and the nearby parking, I backtracked to the hotel. In the process, I discovered an easier route. I didn't want to have any surprises in the morning, when street closures would complicate driving, so I drove back to the start to make sure my revised route "worked." After that, I also drove around downtown a bit to see the city.

Later, I met three friends for dinner at Mediterrano, a restaurant near the mall that featured Greek and Italian cuisine, among others. Dinner with Scot, Sandy and Barbara got the weekend off to a fun start.

I woke up early and drove to Pioneer High School to park. Parking at the school cost five dollars. There were several free lots around the downtown area, but I opted for the closest lot to the start. I got there early enough to get a close parking spot. It was 57 degrees when I arrived, and it was forecast to reach 70 by the time I finished. Although a gear check was available, I decided I wouldn't need warm clothes at the finish.

After a quick bathroom stop, I left my warm-ups in the car and walked to the start. I got there in time to meet other Marathon Maniacs for a group photo in front of the Michigan stadium. At the group photo, I met Merete and Mark. Merete is from Tromsø, Norway, where I'll be running the Midnight Sun Marathon. Mark was running his first marathon, and they ran together the whole way.

I didn't have a firm time goal, other than finishing under 3:30, so could get a BQ. I wasn't sure how fast I started. I missed the first two mile markers, so I didn't know my pace until three miles. I was averaging about 7:20 per mile, which would bring me in between 3:10 and 3:15, if I could sustain it. I had my doubts, since I knew the late miles would be hot. I kept the same pace for the first seven miles, but the next two miles were uphill, and I had to slow down. After the hills, I resumed my earlier pace, but I never made up the time I lost on the hills.

There were two out-and-back sections in the middle of the race. The first one was long enough that I got to see several friends who were running at different paces. Right after the second out-and-back, I reached the halfway mark in roughly 1:37. I was already starting to get hot, so I didn't expect to maintain the same pace in the second half.

Somewhere around 15 miles, a helicopter flew overhead and landed nearby. The draft from the rotors was so strong that my hat went flying. I had to stop and run back to get it. After picking up my hat and starting to run again, I couldn't get back into the same pace. My legs felt stiff after stopping. As I was retrieving my hat, the 3:15 pace group went by. I didn't try to keep up. I accepted that I'd be doing well to finish under 3:20.

Next we went onto a trail for about a mile, which included a tough hill. I could tell I was going slow, but I just conserved my effort for later. I didn't know how much I slowed until the next mile marker. It was 8:51. Although that was my slowest mile of the race, I was relieved that it wasn't worse. It wasn't until a mile later that I got an idea what pace I could sustain for the rest of the race. My next several miles averaged about eight minutes per mile.

I didn't eat any solid food before the race, so it wasn't until midway through the race that my digestive system woke up. I wanted to make a bathroom stop, but I was afraid stopping for a minute or two would cause my legs to stiffen up like they did in Fargo. For now, I could wait, so I did.

With about seven miles to go, we were on State St., and I realized we weren't far from the football stadium where we started. At first I wondered where we would run for seven more miles. Then I remembered. We would follow State St. to Briarwood Mall, run all the way around the mall, and then return on State. It was nice that the rest of the route was mostly familiar, but it was also a bit overwhelming. That seemed like a long way to run.

The out-and-back along State St. was another opportunity to see faster or slower runners. I started to see the lead runners coming back. The first two men were separated by less than one stride. The leader was gritting his teeth and appeared to be working hard. The runner right behind him seemed relaxed. I don't know who won, but I'd be surprised if it wasn't the guy who looked relaxed.

A long time later, I saw the third place male. I remembered seeing him just a bit ahead of me in the first mile. He was farther ahead at the earlier turnarounds, but he must have run a strong second half to be in third place. The next runner was starting to walk. It seemed tragic to see one of the leaders running out of gas with only a few miles to go. I said everything I could think of to encourage him, but it probably didn't help. Next I saw the lead woman. She was the last runner I saw before turning onto Briarwood Circle. After that I wouldn't see other runners until I was on the way back.

Briarwood Circle doesn't seem very far around when you're in a car, but it's a long way to run when you're 21 miles into a marathon and running out of gas. It was a bit weird to run right past my hotel. I was tempted to go

in and use the bathroom, but I knew I didn't have that much time to spare. If I pressed on, even slowly, I would beat 3:30 with several minutes to spare. If I stopped, I might not beat 3:30 at all. I had to tough it out.

As I left Briarwood Circle to return to campus, I saw a few runners I recognized. For the second time in the race, I saw Merete and Mark. They were well ahead of Mark's goal of four hours, and he looked strong. The runners heading toward the mall were on my left. I knew at some point we would need to turn left, but I wasn't sure how that would work. I got my answer when I saw another runner turn right just after going under a bridge. We were taking a ramp that would lead us up to the bridge.

There was a sharp turn to get onto the bridge, and for the first time I noticed several painful blisters on my left foot. The turn must have aggravated them. As I looked to the center of the bridge, I saw the 24 mile mark. That gave me a psychological lift, and I was able to ignore the blisters.

As we followed Stadium Blvd. back to Main St., I wondered how it was possible that we could still have 2.2 miles left. When we turned and passed the intersection where we started, I was even more puzzled. I knew the finish area was only a few blocks away, but we hadn't reached 25 miles yet. When we reached the street where I expected to turn, I got my answer. Instead of turning, we had another out-and-back section. We would make the turn on our way back. At this point I knew I would finish around 3:21 or 3:22, and I was just trying to grind it out.

When I finished the last out-and-back and made the turn, I saw half marathon runners coming from the opposite direction. We all turned onto the same street and headed to the football field where we would finish. I never saw the 26 mile marker, so I was happy to see the 13 mile sign for the half marathon. The finish line was at the 40 yard line of a football field that's used for band practices. Running across the turf made my blisters hurt again, but with the finish line in sight, I didn't care.

I finished in 3:21:29. I was satisfied with that time under the conditions. It was about 70 degrees, and the heat wore on me in the second half. I later learned that I placed third in my age group. Reflecting back on the race, even though I was struggling, I was passing other runners. The only time I got passed was when I had to retrieve my hat.

After getting my finisher medal and some water, I headed to the food tent. They had pizza, a variety of cookies, fruit, and gigantic muffins. I ate what I could, but they had more food than I needed. While I was eating and recovering, I chatted with other runners who were Marathon Maniacs and/or 50 Staters. Then I checked my watch and realized I could still get back to the finish line in time to see Merete and Mark finish. I enjoyed having the opportunity to shake Mark's hand after he finished. Seeing someone finish their first marathon is always exciting.

I eventually walked back to the car and drove to the hotel. As I turned onto Briarwood Circle, I saw runners who still had five miles to go. I wanted to encourage them, but knowing how awful I felt at that point, I couldn't think of the right thing to say.

I was able to spend a leisurely afternoon recovering from the race, including spending some time in the whirlpool. Although it would have been nice to save a vacation day, there's something to be said for not having to rush to the airport after a race. Later I had dinner at California Pizza Kitchen, where I was able to get a free "small plate" using a coupon I got at the expo. While I was there, I also had pizza of course.