Firecracker Quadzilla by David Holmen
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On July 4-7, 2013, I ran four marathons in the suburbs of Portland, OR. For those who did all four races, they were collectively known as the Firecracker Quadzilla. The largest of the four was the Foot Traffic Flat Marathon, which is always held on July 4th. This year, the 4th was on a Thursday. Steve Walters organized three smaller races on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, making it possible to run a quadzilla.

Quadzilla is a term coined by Marathon Maniacs several years ago. The three races that compose the Tahoe Triple used to be held on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Some runners would travel to another nearby race on Sunday, such as the Auburn Marathon. Those who completed the Tahoe Triple and also ran Auburn (or some other marathon) on Sunday, referred to this feat as quadzilla. It became a tradition among long-time Marathon Maniacs.

Since then, the Tahoe Triple has moved to Friday through Sunday, so it no longer lends itself to being combined with other races for a quadzilla. A few years ago, a few race directors in the Seattle area, organized three small races which could be combined with the Seattle Marathon to form the Seattle Quadzilla. As running a quadzilla is a badge of honor among Marathon Maniacs, I considered doing the Seattle Quadzilla two years ago. These races are held over Thanksgiving weekend, and my family persuaded me to defer any such plans, since doing these races would force me to be away from home and family for the entire Thanksgiving weekend.

In 2011, when the Foot Traffic Flat Marathon was on a Monday, Steve Walters organized two small races on the weekend to create the Firecracker Triple. I ran the Firecracker Triple that year, and did surprisingly well. I ran a few minutes faster each day, finishing with the fastest combined time for the triple. When I found out Steve was adding a Friday race this year to make a quadzilla possible, I knew I had to do it. It's something I looked forward to for over a year. When registration for Steve's races opened, I signed up within minutes.

Having done the Firecracker Triple in 2011, I was already familiar with three of the four race venues. I chose a hotel in the western suburbs that was close to two of the courses and was centrally located for the weekend's events.

I was able to get a nonstop flight to Portland, but the airfare was expensive, so I booked the trip using Delta SkyMiles. I arrived in the early afternoon on Wednesday, giving me time to pick up my race packet at Foot Traffic and meet Lis Cooper for a late lunch. When I checked into my room at the Embassy Suites in Tigard, it didn't seem like the air conditioning was working. I was able to switch to another room, but by the time I moved into the new room and made sure it was cooling off sufficiently, I no longer had time to meet other runners for dinner. Although I regretted missing a chance to see everyone, I didn't really need a big dinner after eating a late lunch. Instead, I had a light dinner at the hotel and turned in early.

The Foot Traffic Flat Marathon is held on Sauvie Island in the Columbia River valley. The race didn't start until 6:30, but I woke up early, so I could get there by 5:30. If you try to arrive much later, you can get stuck in traffic. There's only one bridge onto the island. Because I was driving from the western suburbs, I was able to take a different route than people driving from downtown. I arrived early enough that I didn't encounter any traffic, and I had no trouble parking. After parking my car, I had time for a bathroom stop before joining others for group photos at 6:00.

My intention was to hold back and run this race just under 3:30. After running the first mile in 8:05, I settled into a slightly faster pace of about 7:50 per mile. It felt easy, so I didn't worry that it was a bit

faster than planned. My favorite part of the race was the long out-and-back in the first half, because I got to see every runner in the race. Late in the race, the pace no longer felt easy, but I couldn't resist the temptation to maintain the same pace and break 3:25. I actually ran the second half a minute faster, finishing in 3:24:01.

Post-race refreshments included hot dogs and strawberry shortcake. While I was waiting in the long line for hot dogs, I saw several of my friends. Besides the other runners doing the Quadzilla, there were numerous Marathon Maniacs doing this race. It's a popular local race. Before leaving, I stopped at the Pumpkin Patch Market to buy small cherry and blueberry pies. Each pie is about two servings, so these two pies would be my pre-race breakfasts for the remaining races.

This race helped me reach a different kind of marathon milestone. It gave me marathon finishes on every day of the week. This idea might never have occurred to me if not for a conversion with Tom Adair, who's done the same thing. It's not a goal I was actively pursuing, but it fell in place with races I wanted to do anyway. I've done numerous races on Saturdays and Sundays. The Boston Marathon is always held on a Monday. The Emerald Bay Marathon of the Tahoe Triple was on a Friday. The 12-12-12 Marathon of Sarasota happened to fall on a Wednesday. The Texas Marathon is always on New Year's Day, and this year it was on a Tuesday. Finally, the Foot Traffic Flat Marathon fell on a Thursday this year.

Since my goal was to not only finish four marathons, but run four relatively fast races, post-race recovery was at least as important as the races themselves. My recovery strategy included four steps. First, after each race I refueled as quickly as possible. I emphasized rehydrating, replacing carbohydrates, and getting enough protein to repair the muscle damage. The second step was taking an ice bath as soon as I got back to the hotel. I hate ice baths, but they reduce the inflammation, and I couldn't afford to take any shortcuts. The third step was to take a hot whirlpool bath immediately after the ice bath. Finally, after using the whirlpool to loosen up my muscles, I stretched and used a massage stick to massage them. I tried to take these four steps as soon as I could after each race. Later in the day, I continued to hydrate and I had dinner with four other runners at Old Spaghetti Factory.

The second race of the quadzilla was the Summerlake Loopy Marathon. This race was held at Summerlake Park in Tigard. It was a short loop that we ran 28 times, ensuring we would all see each other throughout the morning. This was the only race of the four that I had never done before. As I started running, I noticed only minimal soreness, so I quickly established a fast pace. I thoroughly enjoyed seeing all the other runners throughout the race. For most of the race, I was on pace for 3:25. I was working harder than the day before, but other than that, I felt OK. With five or six laps to go, the pace got too difficult, so I eased up a bit. I finished in 3:27:24.

I followed the same post-race recovery regimen. Ideally, I should have rushed back to hotel to take an ice bath as soon after finishing as possible. Instead, I lingered to talked to other runners and see some of my friends finish. Before I left, several of us made plans for dinner. Coincidently, we ate dinner at Old Spaghetti Factory again. It’s in a good location, they have lots of parking, and they have a variety of good entrees.

The third race of the quadzilla was the Freedom Marathon. This race was a double out-and-back on a paved bike path, starting at Main City Park in Gresham. It was a longer drive from my hotel, but after 28 laps with lots of turns and small hills, I was looking forward to a course where I could get into a good rhythm and then run several miles in a straight line.

My race almost got off to a disastrous start when I started changing into my running shoes and realized that I forgot to bring socks. I was afraid I would have to race in an old pair of sweat socks

that I use for everyday wear. Because this race was clear across town in Gresham, I didn't have time to go back to the hotel. I was rescued by Tom Craven. Tom had an extra pair of running socks that he was willing to let me borrow, and they were a perfect fit.

The course didn't have mile markers, so I would only know my pace at the turnaround points, every 6.55 miles. When we started running, my legs felt stiff, but I forced myself into a fast pace and they loosened up. I suspected I was going too fast, but I maintained the same effort to the first turnaround. To be on pace for 3:30, I needed to get there in 52:30. I got there in roughly 50:30, putting me two minutes ahead of schedule. By the halfway point, I had increased my cushion to roughly three and a half minutes. I would have been happy to maintain that cushion to the third turnaround, but I worked hard and increased my cushion to six minutes. Eventually, I started to run out of gas. I gave some time back, but finished in 3:24:18.

This time I didn't linger as long in the finish area before driving back to my hotel. As a result, I took my ice bath sooner. I had a shot at beating 3:30 on four consecutive days, but post-race recovery was critical. I didn't know of any plans for dinner, so I had an early dinner at Burgerville. While technically fast food, this chain is better than most and features ingredients from local producers. They always have a seasonal milkshake flavor. Their seasonal flavor for July was fresh Oregon raspberry. When I got back to Embassy Suites, I stopped for a beer at the manager's reception and bumped into Jay Pettit and Joan Kim, who were also racing this weekend.

The final race of the quadzilla was the Stars and Stripes Marathon. This race was eight laps of a 3.28 mile loop in Greenway Park in Beaverton. The course was only a few minutes from my hotel. When I did this race in 2011, it was a 2.62 mile loop that we ran 10 times. Steve added two out-and-back segments to lengthen the loop. I didn't have much soreness in my legs, but I didn't have any energy. When I tried to set a fast pace, I quickly got winded. With effort, I managed to sustain eight minute miles for the first five laps, but then the wheels came off. After falling off the pace, I focused on a new goal. My dream goal had been to run each race under 3:30. If I could finish the race in 3:44, my average time for the four races would still be under 3:30. The last two laps were difficult, but I finished in 3:38:28.

After the race, I had lunch with other runners at Si Senor. After lunch, I dropped a few things off at the hotel and went back to the finish area in time to see a few more friends finish. Then I joined a few of them for a second lunch at Burgerville. Actually, they had lunch and I had a raspberry shake.

We got lucky on the weather. In the days leading up to July 4th, Portland was experiencing temperatures in the upper 90s. The hot weather ended the day before the first race. Even still, I was expecting overnight lows near 60 with sunny skies and climbing temperatures. We actually had overnight lows in the mid 50s and more clouds than sun. The only race that started getting uncomfortably warm was the last one.

Steve Walters did a lot of little things that made the quadzilla weekend more memorable. At the Summerlake Loopy Marathon, he put up signs with each runner's name and one of their running accomplishments. He also made back bibs with our names and where we were from, so we could encourage each other. Everyone who did the quadzilla received a small bumper sticker and a glass. He gave pins to all the Titanium (10 star) Marathon Maniacs. For anyone who qualified for Marathon Maniacs or Half Fanatics, he had "I just qualified..." signs. One of the new qualifiers for Half Fanatics was Steve's mom. Finally, at two of the races, runners were celebrating birthdays. Each time, Steve brought cake or donuts, and everyone at the finish line sang "Happy Birthday" as they finished.

I'm proud of myself for finishing the quadzilla with an average time of 3:28. That said, it's hard to imagine doing another one any time soon. The fourth race was grueling. I always look for new ways

to challenge myself, but I think future challenges are more likely to be running farther or running faster.