

Flying Pig in Cincinnati by David Holmen

May 2013

On May 5, 2013, I ran the Flying Pig Marathon in Cincinnati, OH. This was the second time I did this race. I ran it in 2000, and knew I had to come back and run it again. It's hard to believe it took me 13 years to make it back to Cincinnati. For years, I've been focused on long-term goals, like running marathons in all 50 states. I still have a few long-term goals, but this year I'm finding the time to repeat many of the races I've enjoyed in the past.

When I did this race in 2000, it was a relatively new race. Everyone really got into the flying pig concept. I saw runners wearing rubber pig snouts, curly tails and pig ears. At the expo that year, they were selling inflatable wings that you could clip to your back, and I saw several runners wearing those as well. I'm not someone who generally runs wearing a costume, but I decided back in 2000 that when I eventually did this race again I would wear all the flying pig accessories.

I'm not the only one who enjoyed our trip to Cincinnati in 2000. Deb did as well. When we were picking vacation destinations for this year, Cincinnati made the list. More precisely, Covington Kentucky made the list. Covington is directly across the Ohio River from downtown Cincinnati. In 2000, we stayed at the Embassy Suites in Covington, which is right on the riverfront. At the time, we stayed there because Deb could get the outrageously cheap employee rate of \$39 per night. This year, we had to pay a normal rate, but we stayed at the same hotel, because we love the location. I could get to the start of the race in downtown Cincinnati by walking across the picturesque John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge. This bridge was the prototype for the Brooklyn Bridge. We also liked the shops and restaurants in Covington and nearby Newport.

Deb and I both love Cincinnati style chili. It has a unique flavor that features allspice instead of hot chili peppers. We also like the way it's served. At a minimum, it's usually served over a plate of spaghetti and topped with a mountain of finely shredded cheddar cheese. That's called three-way chili. You can make four-way chili by adding a layer of either onions or pinto beans. If you add both, it's five-way chili. There are several restaurants in Cincinnati and nearby cities that serve their own variations of Cincinnati chili. There are also two large chains called Skyline Chili and Gold Star Chili. Each has dozens of restaurants throughout the region including locations within walking distance of our hotel. In 2000, we tried both Skyline Chili and Gold Star Chili. This year, we picked out an older restaurant called Dixie Chili. Dixie Chili has six-way chili, which adds finely chopped garlic as the sixth layer. They also had a restaurant in Newport, which was only about a mile from our hotel.

We arrived on a Friday, two days before the marathon. At the airport, we were met by greeters who were giving out goody bags to runners. I've never seen that before, but it's one of the details that sets this race apart. Our next pleasant surprise came at the Alamo counter. They noticed it was my birthday, and offered us a free upgrade. I usually reserve the cheapest class of car. Often, they don't have any small cars on the lot, so I'll get a free upgrade to a mid-size car. In this case, they actually had a smaller car, but offered us a Volkswagen Beetle, which surprisingly was an upgrade. Deb has always wanted to drive a Beetle, so she jumped at the offer.

After checking into our hotel, we had an early dinner at Dixie Chili. It happened to be my birthday, which meant I could eat whatever I wanted. In particular, I could have six-way chili. Any other day of the year, Deb might have objected to my eating something with that much garlic. I knew it was going to be strong when I saw the cook preparing it. He did everything else quickly, but he took his time meticulously spreading dozens of pieces of finely chopped garlic over the chili. I loved the garlic, but I still enjoyed the flavors of the other layers. I realized that this was something I could only eat once. My breath was going to reek of garlic for at least the next 24 hours.

Next we went to the marathon expo. Often, I just pick up my race packet and leave quickly. This time, Deb and I were there to shop. After checking each booth at least twice and asking around, we were disappointed to discover nobody had rubber pig snouts. There were also no curly tails or wings. We did see some glasses that had pig-shaped lenses and were trimmed with metal wings, but without the other accessories, I passed on them. It seemed like I would just have to run the marathon dressed like a normal runner.

On Saturday we tried again. We started with a costume store in Newport. The only pig snout they had was one that has to be glued in place. I was hoping for one with an elastic band. They also didn't have anything else that was exactly what I was looking for. They were, however, very helpful. They told us about another costume store in downtown Cincinnati. They also recommended a few restaurants and a candy store with homemade ice cream. Naturally, our lunch consisted of candy and ice cream.



We found a good pig snout at Cappel's in downtown Cincinnati. They also had the same glasses I saw at the expo, so I bought those as well. At first, they didn't fit well, but when I tried them on over the pig snout, they fit better. Cappel's has two downtown stores, located on opposite sides of the same block. The first store we visited didn't have any wings, but their sister store did. They were a pair of white angel wings made with real feathers. They had two loops to slip my arms through, which held them in place on my back. They were sized to be part of a child's costume, so the fit was a bit tight. I was a bit worried my arms or shoulders would get uncomfortable wearing them for 26.2 miles, but I decided to give them a try. I had originally planned to get a pink running shirt to wear with them. Since we didn't want to return to the expo on Saturday (when they would be busier), I had to settle for my backup plan. I had packed my race T-shirt from the 2000 Flying Pig Marathon.

We had dinner in Newport again. This time we went to Newport Pizza Company, which has a pizza topped with Cincinnati chili. It was an awesome combination of two of my favorite foods. We ate early, so we could get back to the hotel in time to watch the Kentucky Derby on TV. I'm not a big follower of horse racing, but I usually watch the Kentucky Derby. I enjoyed it more this year after having run through Churchill Downs a week earlier.

For the second straight week, the weather was problematic. The temperature was forecast to be in the mid-50s, which is perfect. Unfortunately, there was about a 30 percent chance of rain in the early morning, and the chance of rain would increase steadily throughout the day. There's a big difference between 50s with rain and 50s without rain. If you dress right for one, you'll be dressed inappropriately for the other. For most of the day, I had been seeing a forecast with only a 10 percent chance of rain in the early morning. I had planned to wear shorts and my Flying Pig T-shirt. Shortly before we went to bed, I got an updated forecast. Seeing that rain in the morning was now more likely, I started to stress about it. I had to get up early and get ready quickly, so I wanted to have all my clothes ready the night before. My Flying Pig Marathon T-shirt from 2000 was a cotton/polyester blend. It wouldn't be very comfortable in a cold rain. I also didn't know how the wings would hold up in rain or whether they would get heavy.

I set the alarm for 4:30, so we tried to get to sleep early. Deb had no trouble getting to sleep, but I tossed and turned for hours. When I did get to sleep, it was only briefly. I managed three short naps that probably totaled two hours. Then I couldn't get back to sleep. At 4:10, I turned off the alarm and

got up to check the forecast. It still called for a 30 percent chance of rain, increasing to 50 percent by the time I expected to finish. According to the weather app on my phone, the current condition was "showers." I looked outside and it looked like the streets looked dry, but I felt uneasy about it.

After eating a couple of energy bars, taking a hot bath and stretching, I took another look outside. It didn't appear to be raining, but the streets were wet. I had to rethink my running clothes. I would need about 45 minutes to walk to the start, check my gear back and reach my designated "pig pen." I decided to err on the side of being overdressed, rather than risk getting cold before the race even started. Instead of shorts, I wore tights. Instead of my Flying Pig T-shirt, I wore my yellow Marathon Maniac shirt. It didn't fit the flying pig theme, but at least it was a tech fabric.

I packed my pig accessories in my gear bag, donned a plastic rain poncho and headed downstairs. Deb was still sleeping, and I saw no need to disturb her. If she woke up in time, she could walk a few blocks to see me run by. The marathon course would go near our hotel between two and three miles. If she slept later than that, it was probably because she needed the sleep. She had a stressful week.

When I got to the lobby, I recognized Mike. Mike was a runner we met at breakfast on Saturday. Mike and I walked to the start together. It wasn't raining, so I felt comfortable with what I was wearing. When I reached the trucks for the gear bags, I took off my rain poncho and put on the snout, glasses and wings. I started the race wearing polypro gloves, knowing I could put them in my SpiBelt if I didn't need them.

I lined up right behind the 3:15 pace group. That was optimistic. I ran 3:16:50 a week earlier at the Kentucky Derby Festival Marathon, but on Monday I started having cold symptoms. It seemed like I was mostly over the cold, but I didn't know if it would still affect me. Rather than talk myself into having a bad race, I told myself I was over the cold, and it wouldn't affect me. I also told myself the lack of sleep wouldn't stop me from having a good race. That's often the case, if it's only one night.

The Flying Pig Marathon has a moderately hilly course. When I reviewed the elevation profile earlier in the week, I concluded it was comparable to my last race, but the biggest hills came earlier in the race. If I could get through a tough stretch between five and eight miles without wearing myself out, I would have a reasonable chance of running strong in the second half.

For the first mile, I didn't think about my pace. I stayed close to the 3:15 pace group and let them set the pace for me. Near the end of the first mile, I got a bit ahead of them on the down ramp before the first of two bridges across the Ohio River. This bridge took us into Newport, KY. Our pace for the first mile was a bit slow, but that's OK. Before we reached the first water stop, I took off my gloves. It was obvious that I wouldn't need them until it started raining. At two miles, we crossed a smaller bridge that took us from Newport into Covington. By now, I was running ahead of the pace group and my average pace was now a little fast. As I ran through Covington, I looked for Deb, but I never saw her. I assumed that meant she was able to sleep in. I'm glad one of us got sleep.

At three miles, we crossed the Ohio River again to return to Cincinnati. I was still running a little fast, but I didn't worry about it. I knew I would give some time back when we reached the tough hill starting at five miles. After a few miles, I started to get hot. I realized my wings made my back warm. As we left the downtown area and started climbing, I slowed down noticeably. Miles seven and eight were slow, but that was part of the plan. I wanted to run a consistent effort, rather than a consistent pace. I didn't feel like the hill took too much out of me, but I never returned to my earlier pace. I was surprised that the 3:15 pace group was still behind me, but I knew they would reel me in soon.

The 3:15 pace group caught up to me at ten miles. We were running downhill, so at first I was able to speed up to stay with them. Within a mile, however, I realized that pace wouldn't be sustainable for the remainder of the race. I let them go and kept running at a pace that felt sustainable. If I didn't burn myself out, I would probably still beat 3:20. More importantly, I would easily beat my primary goal of 3:30 to get a BQ in Ohio. Although the biggest hills were behind me, I started to really notice the smaller ones. I decided not to worry about my pace as long as I was still keeping each mile under eight minutes.

My pig snout and wings were a big hit with the crowd. I've never come close to getting this much encouragement from the crowd. I got shouts of "Nice wings," "Go piggy piggy," "Oink oink," "Nice outfit," "OMG look at him," and "It's an actual flying pig," to name a few. I got cheers from the spectators, the volunteers, the DJs at the aid stations and a few of the traffic cops. At one aid station, the DJ said, "This is what I've been waiting for all morning," and he told everyone to raise the roof for me.

With about three miles to go, it started to rain. I slowed down to put on my gloves. At first, I thought something else fell out of my SpiBelt, so I stopped and turned around to check the ground. The only thing I lost was time. That ended up being my slowest mile of the race. I had trouble getting back into my pace. For the first time, I was unsure if I could still beat 3:20.

As I approached the 25 mile mark, I heard loud cheers. They weren't for me. They were for the 3:20 pace group, which must have been right behind me. I didn't want to be passed by another pace group, so I poured it on. I crossed the "finish swine" (that's really what they call it) in an official time of 3:19:00.

As soon as I was done running, I started getting cold in the rain. I skipped most of the post-race food and headed toward the busses with the gear bags. I needed to trade my snout and wings for a warmer shirt and my rain poncho. It took a while to figure out where the busses were. In most respects, this is a very well-organized race, but they didn't make it very easy to find the gear busses.

The finish was farther from my hotel than the start. It wasn't easy to figure out how to get up to the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge without crossing the course. After asking several people for directions and taking a somewhat convoluted route, I eventually got there. In all, I walked about two miles from the time I finished the race until I got back to my hotel.

When I got back to the room, I was only thinking about getting out of my wet clothes and taking a hot bath. Then Deb pointed out that the hotel was still serving breakfast for another 15 minutes. Embassy Suites has a nice hot breakfast buffet, including made-to-order eggs. I changed into dry shoes and socks and headed downstairs in time to have an omelet. It paid off to skip the post-race food so I could get back to the hotel quickly.

By the time I cleaned up and changed clothes, Deb was ready for lunch. By this time, it was raining hard enough that we didn't want to venture far from the hotel. We went to Gold Star Chili where we could get shakes, as well as chili. Deb had three-way chili and a cookies & cream shake. I wasn't ready for another big meal yet, so I had a Coney and a banana cream shake.

After lunch, Deb felt like she had overdone it and needed to lie down. I was wiped out from both the race and lack of sleep, so we spent the afternoon napping. I'm not usually able to sleep during the day, but I was actually able to nap. When we woke up, it was already dinner time, and it was still raining. This time Deb wasn't very hungry, but I had an appetite. We went back to Gold Star Chili, where I had three-way chili and Deb had another shake. In three days, I had chili four times at three different restaurants, and each time it was served a different way.

We flew home on Monday. There's a Gold Star Chili in the food court at the airport. Guess what I had for lunch.