

## **Gansett and Boston Marathons by David Holmen**

### **April 2013**

On April 13, 2013, I ran the Gansett Marathon in Narragansett, RI. Two days later, I ran the Boston Marathon. This is the second straight year I've done both of these races. The races themselves were overshadowed by bombings in Boston. I'll talk about the races first and then the tragic events that took place in Boston.

Although I first ran the Boston Marathon in 1991, it wasn't until 2012 that I fell in love with the race. Maybe it's because I knew so many other runners there or maybe it's because of the way the spectators stepped up to support the runners on an unusually hot day. It could be familiarity with the course allowed me to be more observant of my surroundings. Whatever the reason, I understand now why so many of my friends return every year.

Like Boston, the Gansett Marathon has qualifying times. In fact, they're five minutes faster in every age group. Unlike Boston, Gansett is a small race. This year, there were 77 runners. While it has the intimate feeling of other small races, it's not quite as low-key. Everyone who does this race is fast, and some use it as a proving ground.

Narragansett is only about 80 miles from Boston. Since the Gansett Marathon is two days before the Boston Marathon, it's convenient to do both races. In fact, it's so convenient that I never seriously considered doing one without the other. That's sort of unfortunate, since these are both races where you want to bring your best effort. Instead of going all out in one of the races, my plan was to balance my efforts to run two respectable races. That's easier said than done.

In the last two weeks before this trip, my mom and Deb's dad each had serious health issues. For several days, I didn't know if I would make the trip. They both improved, but I was still uneasy about being out of town for five days. I ultimately decided to make the trip, but I wasn't mentally prepared for either race, much less the challenge of trying to race well in both of them. Having done both races before, I was familiar with each course and the important details of each race. I had to have faith that if I got myself to the starting line, familiarity would take over.

I followed the same travel plan as last year. I flew into Boston on Friday and rented a car. Since the expo wasn't near the airport this year, I drove straight to Rhode Island. While it would have been convenient to stay at the host hotel in Narragansett, I got a good rate at the Holiday Inn in South Kingston. It rained hard for the entire drive. I was very glad that I had done this drive before and knew the route. After checking in and dropping off my bags, I continued to Narragansett for packet pickup and the pre-race dinner. This race has a good pre-race dinner, and it's a good place to meet the other runners. I had dinner with several other Marathon Maniacs. I also recognized a few other runners from last year.

The Gansett Marathon has a two year qualifying period. My fastest time during that span was the 3:04:58 I ran at the 2011 London Marathon, so I used that as my qualifying race. Bib numbers are assigned based on your qualifying time. Men have blue race bibs and women have pink race bibs, so they can have separate numbers. The fastest male and female qualifiers each wear number 1. At a glance, you can tell if your qualifying time was faster or slower than any other runner of the same gender. This is one of the subtle ways that the race director challenges you to run fast. Since your bib number is somewhat predictive of where you should place, it's common for runners to try to "beat their bib." I had bib number 19, but I didn't expect to place that high.

The course consists of a 16 mile loop, followed by a 10 mile loop. It's essentially the same loop, but there are some additional out-and-back segments tacked onto the first loop. The morning of the race,

the rain had stopped, but it was cool and windy. I lined up near the back and started at what felt like an easy pace, but it was still faster than I intended.

At about 6 miles, we turned into the wind. I continued to run the same pace, but it was now taking a noticeable effort. I probably should have slowed down, but it's hard to do that in this race. If you're not running fast, you feel guilty. It seems disrespectful to go easy here.

By the end of the first loop, my hands were cold, and I was starting to get tired. As I started the second loop, I once again had the wind at my back. At first, it didn't seem to help, but after about two miles, it felt easier, and I also warmed up.

At 21 miles, I turned into the wind for the remainder of the race. It was tiring, and I slowed a little, but I fought hard to hold the best pace I could. By this time, I was emotionally committed to running as fast as I could. I finished in 3:21:45. I was the 20th male finisher. I was very happy with both my time and my place, but I was concerned whether I could recover in time to run well in Boston.

Since the race finishes near a beach, I would have loved to wade into the cold water to give my legs an instant ice bath. Unfortunately, it was much too cold and windy for that to be an option.

I walked to my car, changed shoes and socks, drained a blister, and put on my warm-up clothes. By the time I got back, almost everyone had finished. Ten minutes later they held the awards ceremony. While we waited, they provided a pasta buffet.

After the awards ceremony, I stopped at Subway for a chicken sandwich and chocolate milk. Although I already had some pasta, I wanted to get some protein. I was now focused on recovery. I spent the afternoon alternately bathing, stretching, and massaging my legs.

I stayed in Rhode Island for another night. The Holiday Inn in South Kingston was much cheaper than any hotel in Boston. It also gave me a chance to join other runners for a post-race party at Twin Willows in Narragansett. In addition to seeing some of the other runners, I had dinner with some of the race volunteers.

Saturday morning, I drove to Boston and returned my car at the airport. For the rest of my trip, I got around using the subway. For the next two nights, I stayed at the Boston Park Plaza. This hotel is very expensive, but it's within walking distance of the finish line. I got the best rate I could by booking through Marathon Tours. I also booked it several months in advance to get an early bird rate.

I arrived at the hotel at 10 A.M. expecting that I would need to check my bags. I was pleasantly surprised to discover they had a room ready. After a quick trip to the expo to pick up my race packet, I walked to the finish line to meet other Marathon Maniacs for group photos. After a few dozen photos, a few of us went to Durgin Park for lunch. I've never been to Boston without eating at Durgin Park, and I've never been to Durgin Park without having Indian pudding for dessert.

In the afternoon, I had to return to the hotel. A blister I first noticed after finishing the Gansett Marathon was starting to get painful. I drained the blister (again) and stayed off my feet as much as possible for the rest of the day.

Monday morning, the temperature was in the upper 30s, but was expected to warm to near-ideal temperatures for the race. Ordinarily in these conditions, I would wear shorts. Mindful of the fact that I would need to drop off my gear bag and walk to my start corral 40 minutes before the race, I decided to wear tights. I risked being overdressed, but I didn't want my hamstrings to tighten up in the cold air.

I got up early and walked to Boston Common to catch a bus to the start. I arrived at the start village in Hopkinton about three hours before the race. I had a Power Bar and some hot cocoa and found a place where I could sit in the sun. Later, I found a few of my friends and sat with them. At 9:20, I checked my bag, left the start village, made a final bathroom stop, and made my way to my corral.

Usually, my concern in a large race is that the start will be slow. That wasn't a problem here. The first two miles are mostly downhill, and everyone around me was starting fast. I actually started much faster than I should have. With a goal of 3:30, I needed to average eight minutes per mile. I was actually averaging less than 7:30.

The blister that was bothering me on Sunday started to hurt again. I was able to ignore it as long as it didn't get worse. Thankfully, it never got worse.

An amusing moment came about five miles into the race. My tights were a cheetah print. There was another runner dressed as a zebra, who had a sense of humor. He saw me and said, "Oh no. It's my worst nightmare." For the next mile, he put on a good show for the crowd. He was running about 30 feet in front of me, and kept looking back and pointing at me, like I was chasing him. I would have loved to continue the chase, but I realized I needed to ease up and let runners go by until I settled into a more sustainable pace.

I knew I was going way too fast when my time at eight miles was a minute faster than it was at Gansett on Saturday. Although I wasn't trying to keep up with the runners around me, I sped up again as we ran by all the screaming women at Wellesley College. At the halfway mark, I was still faster than I was on Saturday.

By now I was getting warm. I was worried that I would regret wearing tights as the temperature climbed above 50. Within a few miles, the wind picked up. I welcomed the breeze because it kept me from overheating.

Between 16 and 21 miles, there are four small hills. If you've been running too fast, they can wear you down. I was gradually slowing down, but still running faster than eight minutes per mile. After cresting Heartbreak Hill, I knew it would be mostly downhill to the finish. Ironically, it was on the downhill that I could no longer maintain my pace.

From 21 miles on, I ran the best pace I could manage; I knew I was slowing down, but also knew I would easily beat 3:30. The wind was getting cold. I was glad I wore the tights. My hands were freezing. I had gloves in my SpiBelt, but my hands were too sticky with Gatorade to put them on. I also didn't want to slow down.

I finished in 3:25:28. I was very excited to run that fast just two days after running hard in the Gansett Marathon. I had no idea that the day would soon turn tragic. Because my hands were cold, I moved quickly through the finish area.

When I have the presence of mind to think of it, I try to make a point of thanking the race volunteers and the police along the course. Sometimes, I'm too preoccupied to remember. On this day, I was pretty good about it. As I moved through the finish area and retrieved my gear bag, I thanked everyone. I'm glad I did. I had no idea that these volunteers were risking their lives by being there. I also didn't realize how heroic they would be later, although I'm not surprised. The people of Boston continue to impress me.

My hotel was only a few blocks away, so I walked there as quickly as I could. I changed into dry clothes and started eating post-race snacks. It wasn't long before two of my friends posted on Facebook that there were two explosions near the finish line. I didn't realize how bad the situation was until I turned on the TV. The local stations had continuous news coverage.

I saw footage of the explosions. Two bombs planted near the finish line exploded several seconds apart. The explosions took place in an area where crowds of people gather to watch the finish of the race. At least three people were killed, including an eight year old boy. More than 100 others were injured. The victims were mostly spectators, but also included race volunteers and runners.

Volunteers in the area rushed to help the wounded. The medical aid station at the finish line was quickly transformed to a treatment center for bombing victims. There were already police in the area, and they moved quickly to seal off the area and prevent more runners from entering the danger zone. They didn't know if there were more bombs. The race was over.

The race officials did what they could to manage an impossible situation. Thousands of runners were still on the course. As they streamed into Boston, they had to be diverted onto other streets. For many, it was difficult to get to their hotels and more difficult to get in touch with their families.

The police worked quickly to secure the downtown area. Federal officials were called in. Together with the local police, they searched for more bombs. One subway line was quickly shut down. The rest of the day was chaotic.

I spent most of the afternoon watching the news, contacting people on Facebook, checking the status of friends in Boston and trying to reach Deb. I was unsuccessful in attempts to use my cell phone to reach her, and she was away from home, so she didn't have internet access.

Monday evening, I was supposed to join other Marathon Maniacs for dinner at John Harvard's Brew House in Cambridge. This is a Marathon Maniac tradition that dates back ten years. I was there last year, and I was looking forward to the dinner almost as much as the races. Most people either couldn't get there or chose to stay at their hotels. I met Bob Hearn for dinner and drinks, but no one else joined us.

Between Facebook, talking with Bob, and talking to other people I met, I learned that many of my friends were affected in different ways. I was one of the lucky ones. I finished the race and reached the safety of my hotel. Some of my friends were done running, but were close enough to the finish to hear the blasts. One friend was crossing the finish line as the first bomb exploded. I met a man who would have been in harm's way, but slowed down so luckily he wasn't there yet. Many of my friends were still on the course. A few were close to finishing. Some had trouble getting home because they couldn't take the subway or couldn't get to their cars. Some were staying at hotels near the finish line that were locked down for security. There were lots of people around the country having difficulty reaching their friends in Boston to find out if they were safe.

I also discovered that for the second straight year, the people of Boston stepped up to support the runners. This year they did it by offering food, water, warm clothes and transportation to stranded runners. Some even opened up their homes to runners who couldn't get to their hotels. I said it last year, and I'm saying it again. Boston has the best spectators of any marathon. One of the things that makes the Boston Marathon so great is the people of Boston.

I don't know how other large marathons will react to this. I don't think the large marathons will ever be the same again. They're all going to ask themselves how they can improve security. It may be an impossible task. This also comes on the heels of the cancellation of the New York City Marathon last

November. I wasn't planning to do either race next year, but I assumed I would do them sometime in the future. Now I'm not sure what the future holds. On one hand, I may want to take a break from the major marathons. On the other hand, I'm even more motivated to keep coming back to Boston.

As for the Gansett Marathon, it's moving to the fall. That means I won't be able to do both races in the same trip again. It also means the next time I do either of these races, I'll be gunning for a fast time.