

Georgia Marathon by David Holmen March 2013

On March, 17, 2013, I ran the Georgia Marathon in Atlanta, GA. This is the second straight year I've done this race. When I entered the 2012 race, I was hoping to get a Boston qualifier in Georgia. Instead, I was recovering from an injury and had to run conservatively. Other than that, I enjoyed the race. Since I still had not qualified for Boston in Georgia, I decided to do the same race again this year.

The Georgia Marathon has a loop course that starts and finishes downtown at Centennial Olympic Park, so it's convenient to stay at a downtown hotel. I stayed at Hampton Inn, which is about two blocks from the park and is also just a few blocks from a MARTA station. Since I could get downtown easily by train, I didn't need to rent a car.

Having done this race before, I knew what to expect. In particular, I remember there were lots of hills. After viewing the course profile, I confirmed my recollection that this course was going to be tougher than my previous few races. Since I barely ran qualifying times in my last two races, I knew I need to step up my training.

My most recent race was the Little Rock Marathon. I felt better after this race than I had after any other race since I injured my right hamstring in January. I quickly got back into training, with an emphasis on hills. There's a limit to how much you can improve your conditioning in just two weeks, but I did what I could. I felt noticeably stronger each day, so I was optimistic.

When I got to the hotel, I bumped into Scott Ludwig in the lobby. It was an interesting coincidence, since one of the things I wanted to do at the expo was buy Scott's fourth book, *In It for the Long Run*. It's a history of the Darkside Running Club, with articles written by various club members over the past 10 years. I've been a Darksider since 2009.

After settling into my room, I walked to the expo. Because it wasn't far, I was able to return to my room to drop things off and get my running clothes organized before heading to dinner. After another brief stop at the expo, I met seven other Marathon Maniacs for dinner at Max's Coal Oven Pizzeria. Most of them I had met at other races just in the last few months.

Weather for the race was perfect. It was 54 degrees at the start and there was very little wind. The forecast was for temperatures to remain in the 50s for the first three or four hours of the race and then warm up rapidly. Since my hotel was close, I didn't bother with a gear bag. The race started at 7:00. I met other Marathon Maniacs for a group photo at 6:30 and then proceeded to my start corral.

Despite my best effort to hold back a little in the early miles, I started too fast. That's been a habit lately. I needed to average 8:00 miles, but I started out doing 7:30s. I missed the first mile marker, so I didn't realize my pace until the two mile mark. I meant to ease up, but in the third mile I ran the same pace. There were several hills in the early miles, and by the time we had gone five or six miles, I was starting to get tired on the steeper ones. I knew that was a bad sign, so I paid more attention to throttling back to a comfortable pace. I had to get used to with letting other runners go by.

The course connects several city parks and historic sites, but in the early miles, I didn't have much awareness of where I was. Mostly, I was paying attention to hills, mile markers and aid stations. The first time I recognized my surroundings was between six and seven miles when we passed the Carter Center. From there, we continued east, eventually reaching Decatur.

Decatur is my favorite part of the course. The residents there are very supportive of the race. In addition to cheering the runners, they also make a point of welcoming us to their community. It was during these middle

miles that we began a stretch of four or five miles that were mostly downhill, but not very steep. This section allowed me to get into a good rhythm. I recovered from the early hills and also put some time in the bank. By the time we reached more big hills, I was almost six minutes ahead of my goal pace.

For the rest of the race, the course is more like a roller coaster. My mantra was “use the downhills, survive the uphills.” I ran two miles that were slower than eight minutes, but only by a few seconds. Then we reached a long steep hill, and I told myself, “Just get to the top.” I didn’t care that other runners were passing me. I knew the last four miles would be mostly uphill, so I had to conserve some energy. That mile took 8:40, but I was OK with that. I made up some of it in the next mile, which was sharply downhill. My next two miles were 8:12 and 8:15. Because I had a five minute cushion, anything close to 8:00 was good.

My recollection was that the last four miles were all uphill. I was relieved to discover that there were a few downhill segments where I could recover. With 2.2 miles to go, I knew I had it, but I almost blew it at the last aid station. Before the water tables, there were a few volunteers handing out cups filled with M&Ms. I grabbed a cup of M&Ms by mistake. I went ahead and threw them in my mouth and started chewing. I tried to wash them down with a cup of water, but as I finished swallowing the water, there were still bits of chocolate in my mouth. It was distracting, but with only a mile to go, I needed to ignore it and focus on running.

As I started the last long hill, I realized I was catching up to the same runners who passed me five miles earlier on the biggest hill. Seeing that I could catch them motivated me to fight for every second. I made a good charge up the hill. With about half a mile to go, I got a shout out from Scott, who was doing the half marathon with his wife Cindy. I continued to push hard, and finished in 3:25:08. I qualified for Boston with almost five minutes to spare. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I also placed third in my age group.

After getting my finisher medal and a bottle of water, I waited for Scott and Cindy. As we continued through the finisher chute, I drank a bottle of chocolate milk, my favorite post-race recovery drink.

At first, I was going to head quickly for the hotel, but after walking about half a block I convinced myself that I really should have more food, so I doubled back. I like the way they do the post-race food at this race. The main sponsor is Publix, and they provided thousands of miniature canvas grocery bags which were pre-filled with snacks. You just walk up to one of the tables, and they hand you a bag with a banana, a fruit cup, cookies, pretzels and an energy bar. While I was in the finish area, I also got a printout of my result. I never know if my watch will be off by a second or two, but this time it matched my chip time.

Usually after a race, I like to stay in town another night before flying home. This time I made an exception, to save money and conserve a vacation day. The race started at 7:00 and I was able to get a 1:00 checkout, so I had plenty of time to take a warm bath and stretch before changing clothes and packing up to leave.

My flight wasn’t until 4:50, so before taking the train to the airport, I checked my bags at the front desk and walked back to the finish line to see if there was anyone there I knew. At first I didn’t see anyone. As I was about to leave, I saw three friends who apparently all finished together, so I had a chance to visit with Halbert, Malisa and Heather while they recovered from the race.

My friend Julia also had a late flight. Besides being a Marathon Maniac, Julia is also a massage therapist. She was kind enough to meet me at my gate and give me a quick massage before I had to board my flight. The next day, I had almost no soreness in my quads despite abusing them badly during the race. As always, I still have very tight hamstrings. That’s a chronic problem that I need to address before I have another injury.

I’m very pleased with my time in this race. On a difficult course, I ran two minutes faster than I did at Little Rock. I’m not in the shape I was in last year at this time, and I’m nowhere near the condition I was in two years ago, but it’s a step in the right direction.