

Kentucky Derby Marathon by David Holmen April 2013

On April 27, 2013, I ran the Kentucky Derby Festival Marathon in Louisville. This is the second time I've run a marathon in Louisville. I did the Louisville Marathon in 2006. Surprisingly, the courses for these two races have almost nothing in common.

I didn't know anything about this race until recently. I signed up for it only a month before the race. One of my long term goals is to qualify for Boston in every state. Another is to finish marathons in less than 3:30 in every state. Currently, the qualifying time for my age group is 3:30, so these two goals are closely aligned. There's one state, however, that's an exception. The Boston Athletic Association used to give you an extra 59 seconds. In 2006, I ran the Louisville Marathon in 3:30:01. The qualifying time for my age group at that time was 3:30, but the BAA would accept any time up to 3:30:59, so I qualified without breaking 3:30. That was my only previous Kentucky marathon. I'm hoping to qualify for Boston in every state by the end of 2013. I decided to add a Kentucky race, so I could reach both goals this year.

This race didn't fit into my schedule well, but it was the only Kentucky marathon that didn't conflict with other plans. Usually when I travel to a race, I don't fly home until the next day. This time I had to make an exception, because I needed to be home before Sunday.

Some of the downtown hotels were already booked, but I was able to get a room at Courtyard by Marriott, which was one of the hotels with a discount for the race. It was conveniently located just two blocks from the expo and within walking distance of the start and finish. The hotel has an airport shuttle, and I was only staying one night, so I didn't initially plan to rent a car.

Closer to the race, I found out a runner who lives in the area was having a pre-race party for Marathon Maniacs. To get there I would either need a car, or I would need to get a ride from someone else staying downtown. I didn't know how much it would cost to rent a car, but I was pleasantly surprised to find I could get a one day rental from Alamo for \$18 (\$25 including all taxes) by booking through AARP.

It was a great party. There were about two dozen runners there, including several I knew. I also met a few other runners who were at Boston this year.

In January, I had a minor hamstring injury doing speed work. While I was recovering, I lost some of my conditioning. I try to beat 3:30 in every race, but in February it took everything I had to finish the Lost Dutchman Marathon in 3:29. Since then, I've focused on slow but steady improvement. Two weeks after Lost Dutchman, I ran the Little Rock Marathon in 3:27. Two weeks after that, I ran the Georgia marathon in 3:25. Four weeks later, I ran the Gansett Marathon in 3:21. Although I didn't show improvement in the Boston Marathon, I did that race just two days after Gansett, so I was happy to run a 3:25.

To continue this trend, a reasonable goal would have been 3:19. Based on recent training runs, I was confident I could do that, but I was hoping for more. I plan to return to Boston in 2014, and I'd like to run in the first wave again. I have a qualifying time that will easily get me into the race, but it's probably not fast enough to get me into the first wave. That's given me new motivation to get my times back under 3:10.

In the days leading up to the race, I couldn't tell what the weather would be like. The temperature was forecast to be in the low 50s, which is ideal. Unfortunately, there was a 50 percent chance of showers. There's a big difference between 50s with rain and 50s without rain. I brought appropriate

running clothes for either case, but I needed to know if it would rain or not. If I dressed for rain and it didn't rain, I would be way overdressed. If I dressed for ideal conditions and it did rain, I would not only be uncomfortable cold – I would likely get hypothermic. I kept checking the forecast. The night before the race it was still impossible to know if it would rain during the race or not.

The night before the race I didn't sleep well. I woke up after about three hours and couldn't get back to sleep. I waited as long as possible before getting up because I was too tired to even think about racing. Eventually I got up to turn on my phone so I could check the forecast. It wasn't raining, but there was still about a 50 percent chance that it would start raining before I finished running. I knew a poor night's sleep wouldn't necessarily keep me from having a good race, so I started getting ready. I decided to wear tights with a short sleeve tech shirt and gloves. If it rained, my arms would get cold. If it didn't, I would be hot, but not as hot as I would be with long sleeves.

I was ready to leave when I took another look out the window. It wasn't raining, and I saw runners headed to the start. They were all wearing shorts. Worried that I was the only one dressing for rain, I changed into shorts and headed to the start. In the elevator, I noticed most of the other runners had a different color bib. Most of the other runners I saw were doing the half marathon, so they didn't have to be as concerned about rain that arrived two hours later. I was about a block away from my hotel when I started to realize how cold I would be if it started raining. It was cloudy, but it didn't look like rain was imminent. On the other hand, it wasn't going to clear up. The chance of rain was supposed to increase throughout the day.

With less than 30 minutes to the start of the race, I debated whether I still had time to return to the hotel and change clothes again. After hesitating for about a minute, I turned around and headed back to the hotel. It's just as well. All the walking back and forth was jump-starting my digestive system. If nothing else, I needed to return to my room to use the bathroom.

After a bathroom stop, I changed back into tights and headed hastily to the start. By the time I got outside, it was only 15 minutes before the start of the race. The start was only three blocks away, but I had to walk another two or three blocks to get to the entrance for my corral. The street had barricades and the sidewalk was congested with runners and their families. It wasn't easy, but I got there in time.

Not counting the elite athletes, there were seven corrals. I was assigned to corral C, so I was a bit dismayed to see the 3:20 pacers were in corral A. I was even more dismayed to see the 3:40 pace group in corral B. After the wheelchair athletes started, everyone else moved forward. I took the opportunity to move as far forward as I could. I managed to reach the 3:40 group, but that was it.

The start was congested, so I couldn't start running until I had walked to the starting line. As soon as I had room to run, I worked hard to get around slower runners and work my way up through the field. After a few blocks, I saw a pace group about a block in front of me. I kept passing people until I caught up to them. It was the 3:30 group.

I missed the first mile marker, so I didn't know my pace until the next one. I reached the two mile mark in 14:40. To beat 3:20, I needed to average 7:37 per mile, but I was actually running 7:20s. I decided to ease up a little, but by this time I had already passed all the slower runners. The runners around me pulled me along at a fast pace, and I reached the three mile mark in 22:00. I was still doing 7:20 per mile.

Just past 5K, I saw the 3:20 group. They were about a block in front of me. At the pace I was going, I would eventually catch up to them. Then I could stay with them and settle into a more sustainable

pace. I was tempted to keep running 3:20s, but I was already getting noticeably warm. I worried that if it didn't rain, I would overheat.

After four miles, I caught up to the 3:20 pace group. It was a large group, and they were spread out all the way across the street. I felt bottled up running behind them, so I worked my way around them with the intention of running just in front of them. Once I was out in the open, I continued running fast, and I left them behind. I think deep down I really wanted to test the waters, even at the risk of overheating.

The course was a loop that started downtown and then headed south for several miles before eventually returning downtown. After eight miles, we ran through Churchill Downs. We ran through the lower level of the building and then through a tunnel under the track. From the other side, I looked back to get a good view of the clubhouse from across the track. Next we passed a practice track where I saw a few horses on training runs. After we left Churchill Downs, the marathon and half marathon courses separated. The instructions were confusing because they call the half marathon a "mini marathon." I almost went the wrong way, but an alert volunteer got my attention and redirected me.

Up to this point, I was still averaging 7:20 per mile, but stopping and changing directions slowed me down. Then I started to ease up in anticipation of the tough middle section of the course. We began a gradual climb to Iroquois Park. I noticed this on the elevation profile before the race. I was expecting a long tough climb going into the park and then a corresponding downhill coming out. In between, we had three miles of rolling hills along a heavily forested loop. I wasn't expecting so many hills. I focused on maintain a steady effort on the uphills and speeding up on the downhills. At 13 miles, I noticed I was on pace to beat 3:15.

By the time we left the park, I was getting tired, but after another mile of downhill running I was able to recover. The wind was picking up, which also helped. It wasn't a strong wind, but it was enough of a breeze to keep me from overheating. As we ran back toward the downtown area, it was mostly flat, and I was once again running strong. Although I wasn't running as fast as I had been earlier, I noticed at 21 miles that I was still on pace to beat 3:15. That wouldn't last much longer.

There's one last hill between 22 and 23 miles. This one took something out of me. I slowed noticeably, and I realized I wouldn't make up the time on the downhill. Realizing I wouldn't beat 3:15, I set my sights on beating 3:17, which would still give me my best finish of the year. I slowed down, but limited the damage and finished in 3:16:50.

After finishing the race, I had to walk back to the hotel as quickly as I could. I needed to get cleaned up, pack, check out and drive to the airport in time to catch a 2:35 flight. I was concerned when I noticed that streets were blocked off for the half marathon. I knew how to get to the freeway without crossing the marathon course, but it didn't occur to me that the half marathon course would still be closed to traffic five hours after the race started. Fortunately, I was able to get to a freeway entrance without crossing either course.

After returning my car, checking in and going through security, I still had time for lunch. I had to skip most of the post-race snacks, so I was hungry. I found a sit down restaurant near my gate. As I was looking at the menu, I saw another runner wearing a marathon finisher medal. I invited him to join me for lunch. As it turns out, he belongs to some of the same running clubs I do and we've done some of the same races. It's a small world when you're a runner.

I'm encouraged by how much I improved in this race. I'm carrying about six extra pounds, so I can't help but wonder if I could break 3:10 if I lost the weight. That was a long-term goal, but Boston 2014 has lit a fire under me to try to get there faster.