

Little Rock by David Holmen

March 2013

On March, 3, 2013, I ran the Little Rock Marathon. This race is popular among runners doing marathons in all 50 states. Most do this one for their Arkansas marathon. I did this one so I could pursue a Boston qualifier in Arkansas. There were at least 200 Marathon Maniacs doing this race, so I knew I would see several runners I know. One thing that makes this race popular is its outsized finisher medal. They claim it's the largest finisher medal of any marathon. Having done the Texas Marathon, which also has a huge medal, I was curious to see if the Little Rock medal was really larger.

Little Rock has a loop course that starts and finishes downtown. I stayed at the Hampton Inn, which was within four blocks of both the start and finish. Although there's a regional airport in Little Rock, I found it more convenient to fly to Memphis instead. To fly to Little Rock on Delta, I would need to make connections in Atlanta. It was quicker and less expensive to fly nonstop to Memphis, rent a car, and drive the rest of the way. The drive time is about 2 hours and 15 minutes.

Sometime after I booked my flight, the flight schedule changed, resulting in a later arrival time. Although I still expected to reach Little Rock before the expo closed, I realized a flight delay or unexpected traffic tie-up could cause me to arrive late. As a precaution, I asked my friend Keith to pick up my race packet for me. Keith was arriving a day earlier. By chance, this was the third straight race that we both ran. It's a small world when you're a Marathon Maniac.

My flight arrived on time, but midway through the drive, I started seeing ominous signs advising motorists of construction delays. Long before I got to the construction zone, I was seeing signs saying "expect lengthy delays," "consider alternate routes" and "be prepared to stop." I was beginning to wonder if I would be stuck on this highway for hours. Knowing that Keith already had my race packet allowed me to continue my drive without stressing about it. As it turns out, the construction was no big deal. It probably slowed my drive by a few minutes.

After checking into my hotel, I called Keith, who was staying at another downtown hotel. He gave me my race packet, and we had an early dinner at Gusano's Pizzeria. I love Chicago-style pizza, and this one really hit the spot.

The weather was unusually cold for a southern state. It snowed Saturday morning, and the temperature was forecast to drop into the 20s overnight. Knowing it would warm into the low 40s by the time I finished running, it was a bit tricky deciding what to wear. I eventually opted for short sleeves with arm warmers, rather than a long-sleeve tech shirt that might be too warm later in the race.

The race didn't start until 8:00, but Hampton Inn started their breakfast service at 5:30. In a departure from my usual pre-race routine, I got up at 5:20, threw on some clothes so I could go downstairs for a quick breakfast, and went back to my room to start getting ready for the race.

Keith and I were able to help each other out before the race. I let him store his bags in my room, since he had to check out of his hotel before the race. Since Keith was already heading to the finish area to drop off his gear bag, he was also able to drop one off for me. Otherwise, I would have tried to make do without any extra post-race clothes.

Because of the cold weather, I waited as long as possible before leaving for the start. I missed the Marathon Maniac pre-race photo, but I saw many of my friends during or after the race. As I lined up to start, it was amazing how many other Marathon Maniacs I bumped into. We were well represented at this race.

To get a Boston qualifier, I needed to finish in 3:30. Mindful that I was barely able to do that in my last race, I started somewhat conservatively. My first mile was 7:48. That seemed reasonable, but I was mindful not to go any faster.

The first mile looped through downtown. Then we crossed the Arkansas River into North Little Rock. After a four mile tour of the north side, we crossed the river again. In the middle miles, we ran by the state capitol and began a noticeable uphill trend. I maintained a consistent effort, rather than try to keep pace. Miles 14 and 15 were a little slower than the pace I needed to average, but by this time I had built up a cushion of a few minutes. During this stretch I started to see runners who took the early start.

After the 16 mile mark, the next two miles were mostly downhill. I was expecting this to be the easy part of the course, but it was just steep enough to feel uncomfortable. By the time we reached the bottom, my legs were complaining.

The next few miles were an out-and-back section. Now in addition to seeing friends who took the early start, I was also seeing faster runners who were already on their way back. I got to see quite a few of my friends.

Going out it seemed like we were running into the wind. After starting to get warm on the hills, I was getting cold again. I looked forward to turning around because I assumed the wind would be at our back. I was wrong. I'm not sure how, but it seemed like we were going into the wind both ways. With five miles to go, I was cold and I was starting to run out of gas.

With four miles to go, I had a four minute cushion. Even though I was slowing down, I was pretty confident that I would get my Boston qualifier. The final challenge came in the form of two small hills in the last three miles. On the elevation profile, they looked like speed bumps, but this late in the race they took something out of me.

After the 25 mile mark, I saw an aid station. Initially I was going to skip it. Then I saw they had beer and changed my mind. I don't think they had many takers before me, because I got a few cheers. The beer tasted good enough to give me a psychological lift that carried me through the last mile. I finished in 3:27:29.

After crossing the line, I received one of their gigantic finisher medals. It was the heaviest medal that I've actually worn around my neck. (At the Texas Marathon they hand it to you in a box.) Next, a volunteer wrapped a Mylar blanket around me and fastened it in place with a clothes pin. I've only done one other race that did something similar. That was the New York City Marathon, where they use a piece of tape. It's a small detail that makes a huge difference. Usually, you go through the finish area using one hand to hold the blanket in place. I wish more race organizers would pick up on this idea.

They had a variety of sweet snacks and my favorite post-race recovery drink: non-fat chocolate milk. I probably ate too much. By the time I was done, I didn't want to eat anything sweet for a long time.

After getting my gear bag and pulling on another layer of clothes, I visited with friends for a while. When I started heading back to the hotel, I kept seeing more friends who had just finished. It seemed like everyone was at this race.

The Little Rock Marathon put on a post-race party that was free for runners and \$20 for guests. This was one of the best post-race parties I've seen. They had a barbeque dinner, an open bar, and a band that had people out on the dance floor the whole time. At the bar, they had a locally brewed spirit called Arkansas Lightning. Their featured flavor was apple pie.

Even though many runners had to leave that afternoon to catch flights, the party was still packed. I saw runners I didn't know were at this race. As always, I also met some new friends.

I didn't have to fly home until Monday, but I had to drive back to Memphis first. I left right after breakfast, just in case there really were "lengthy delays." There weren't, so I arrived in Memphis three hours before my flight. I didn't mind though, because Memphis is my favorite airport for a long stopover. I had a leisurely lunch at the Sun Studio Café, where I had my final fix of southern barbeque before heading home. My biggest challenge in preparing for my next race may be losing the weight I put on this weekend.

