

## Memphis Marathon by David Holmen

December 2011

On December 3, 2011, I ran the St. Jude Memphis Marathon in Memphis, TN. I was traveling solo, so I was only in Memphis for two nights. I didn't allow much time for sightseeing. I was more interested in getting together with friends. Several of my friends were doing this race, including Maricar "Liberty Lady" Korff, who finished running marathons in all 50 states at this race.

I stayed at the Hampton Inn on Poplar. This hotel is about 10 miles from downtown Memphis. I would have preferred to stay at a downtown hotel, but the hotels close to the start and finish were already booked when I called. I got a very good rate (less than half the price of downtown hotels), but it wasn't a very convenient location. Each trip into downtown was 25-30 minutes each way, plus I had to find parking.

Getting to the expo took a little longer than I expected, because some of the nearby parking lots were full. After picking up my race packet, I inquired about road closures. I wasn't sure if I would have difficulty getting in and out of the downtown area. I spoke to the race director, who was very helpful. He said if I got downtown between 6:00 and 6:30, I should be able to find parking at the parking garages that are closest to the start. He also told me I wouldn't have any trouble with road closures, but I should avoid Poplar on my way out of downtown. That was good to know, since the most direct route was taking Poplar all the way to and from downtown.

I drove back to the hotel, so I could organize all my race clothes before going to dinner. Unfortunately, that didn't quite leave enough time to do any sightseeing before dinner.

For dinner, I joined Maricar and several of her friends for a pre-race party at King's Palace. While I was looking for the restaurant, I got the impression that you couldn't go wrong with any of the restaurants on Beale Street. Most of them featured BBQ and/or blues bands. Many of Maricar's friends were runners I had met at other races, so it was like a family reunion.

I got up early the next morning and arrived downtown just before 6:00. I parked at a garage that was within a block of FedEx Forum, which was open the morning of the race so runners could come in to use the facilities and get out of the cold. It was 49 degrees – comfortable for running, but a little chilly for standing around outside. There was a 5K race that started before the marathon, so I was very glad I got there before most of the 5K runners.

Shortly after 7:00, I went back to the car to drop off my warm-up clothes. Then I joined other Marathon Maniacs for group photos at 7:30.

My goals for this race were to run a time in the 3:20s and run a consistent pace. In my previous two races, I started too fast and struggled in the second half.

I started with the 3:25 pace group, and the pace felt very manageable. The first few miles of the course were downtown. About two miles into the race, we run along the Mississippi River for a few blocks. Then we turned and climbed a short hill. I heard one of the pacers say this was the toughest hill on the course. It was actually only a small hill, so I knew at this point the course would be fairly easy. The biggest difficulty would be the sections that were into the wind.

Next we ran down Beale Street, where we were serenaded by an “Elvis.” As we left downtown, I started to get ahead of the pace group, but I was careful not to speed up too much. The next several miles were a nice mixture of residential neighborhoods and parks.

After about 11 miles, we returned to the downtown area. Just before 20K, the marathon and half marathon courses separated. There were more runners in the half marathon, so I was worried I wouldn't have much company after the split. I was pleasantly surprised when several of the runners right ahead of me stayed on the marathon course. Unfortunately, I was so focused on other runners, that I didn't notice we were running right past Sun Studios, where Elvis Presley had his first recording sessions in 1954.

Our second trip through downtown featured another run down Beale Street, but this time we were running in the opposite direction. We ran past “Elvis” again, and he was singing a different song.

In the second half of the race, I maintained a fairly consistent pace, but the runners around me were slowing down. I made a point of passing as many runners as I could, so I wouldn't slow down myself.

From miles 19 to 24, I was getting warm and my mile times got a little bit slower. Then I heard a faster runner coming up quickly on my left. As she began to pass me, I told her she was the only runner to pass me in the second half, and I encouraged her to finish strong. She encouraged me to stay with her, and I accepted the challenge. I had to dig deep at first, but in time I was able to pick up the pace a little more, and we took turns pushing each other. With half a mile to go, I couldn't stay with her any longer. Even though I fell behind, I ran that mile in 7:05. It was by far my fastest mile of the race.

I finished in 3:22:10. The second half was just 20 seconds slower than the first half. I achieved both of my goals.

The race finished inside AutoZone Park, a baseball stadium. We entered the stadium in the middle of center field and ran along the warning track to reach the finish line. The marathon course finished in right field, and the half marathon course finished in left field. The two finish chutes met up near home plate, where we climbed the steps to get to the food zone.

The post-race food was impressive. In addition to all the usual post-race fare, they had pizza, vegetable soup, Krispy Kreme donuts and chocolate milk. I love the way they made use of the stadium. After going through the food line, we had access to picnic tables and real bathrooms. They also had showers.

I took my time refueling before walking back to the car. By the time I drove back to the hotel and got cleaned up, I once again found that I didn't quite have enough time for sightseeing before driving back downtown for dinner.

Dinner was another party in Maricar's honor. This time we ate at Charles Vergos' Rendezvous, a famous BBQ restaurant that was really packed. Afterwards, we went to another restaurant for dessert.

My biggest regret is that I never had time to take a tour of Graceland. The self-guided tour takes about 90 minutes, but with the round-trip drive time, I would have needed about two and a half hours. Each day, I had an hour or more to spare, but it wasn't quite enough.

Sunday morning, I was tempted to drive downtown to see Sun Studios. When it started raining, I opted instead to get to the airport early and have a leisurely lunch before my flight. I ended up eating at a Sun Studio themed restaurant, where I was joined by Maricar and Alison, who were flying home at about the same time.

This is a race I would recommend. Book early, though, if you want to stay downtown. I recommend staying someplace close to Beale Street.