

New Orleans by D. Holmen
March 2012

On March 4, 2012, I ran the Rock N Roll New Orleans Marathon. I originally planned this race as part of a New Orleans vacation with Deb. Unfortunately, Deb wasn't able to make the trip, so I had to go alone.

My left hamstring was still injured, so I wasn't at all confident that I could finish a marathon, and I was worried that it wasn't a good idea to try. I would have cancelled the trip, but I was looking forward to seeing friends who were also doing the race. In addition to all the Marathon Maniacs, I was also planning to get together with some friends from Augusta who I met at two other races.

One convenient thing about this race is that the marathon and half marathon start together and the two courses don't separate until after 12 miles. If you're registered for the marathon, you can switch to the half marathon just by heading to the half marathon finish line instead of continuing with the marathon course.

In 2005, I ran the Mardi Gras Marathon in 2005, which was a predecessor of the current race, but had a different course. The first half of the new course combines my favorite sections of the old course, while omitting the boring sections. The second half of the new course goes up to Lake Ponchartrain and does a couple out-and-back segments along Lakeshore Drive. I had never seen this part of town, so it was a chance to run by some new scenery.

I stayed at Drury Inn, which was conveniently located just two blocks from the starting line of the race. Drury Inn has some nice features, including a breakfast buffet, 5:30 "kickback" (happy hour with appetizers), and a heated pool and hot tub on the roof.

After checking in at Drury, it was about 6:20 PM. The expo went until 7:00, so I decided to pick up my race packet before having dinner. Unfortunately, I underestimated how far it was to the expo hall. I didn't want to hurt my leg by trying to walk too quickly, so I walked very cautiously. By the time I got to the expo, it was 6:55. I was able to get my race packet, but all the exhibitors were closing up for the day. I had been hoping to shop for a few things, so I regretted making the trip on Friday instead of waiting until Saturday morning.

By the time I got back to the hotel, it was 7:30. I had no idea where I was going to eat dinner and it was too late to make plans with friends. Fortunately, a hotel employee was able to recommend Reginelli's Pizza, which was only a block away. Reginelli's had excellent brick oven pizza, as well as a variety of pasta dishes.

Saturday morning, I strolled into the French Quarter. First, I went to Café du Monde for beignets and hot cocoa. Then I wandered around town, taking pictures, and absorbing the atmosphere of the city.

After returning to the hotel to get off my feet for a while, I decided to head back to the expo. I didn't want to do that much extra walking, but I was hoping to find an adjustable compression wrap what I could wear on my hamstring during the race. I had an Ace bandage, but it's tricky to get it wrapped just right. If you start running, and then discover it's either too tight or too loose, it's hard to make adjustments. I found exactly what I was looking for. It was a padded neoprene wrap made specifically for hamstring injuries, which fastened with Velcro. It was very easy to adjust. In addition to compression, it looked like it would also keep my leg warm in the cool morning air.

About the same time I finished shopping the expo, I found out a few of my friends from Augusta were on their way from the airport. I met them at the expo, and after they checked into their hotel, we went

to dinner. Since no one else had picked out a restaurant yet, I suggested Reginelli's. I felt bad when we got there and discovered there would be a 30 minute wait for a table. Apparently a lot of other people had the same idea.

My friend Shannan was doing the half marathon. Since she runs at a slower pace than I do, I decided to start the race with her. I had done a few short runs on a treadmill during the week and found that I could run without discomfort, but only if I kept the pace slow. I figured Shannan's pace would be just right for me. It would keep me from aggravating my hamstring injury. The compression wrap was an extra measure of insurance.

My plan was to stay with Shannan for the first 12 miles, and then if I felt OK, I would continue on my own. If I didn't think I could finish the marathon without risking further injury, my backup plan was to finish the half marathon. Although it wasn't the race I was hoping to finish, I would still get a cool finisher medal with Mardi Gras beads. Finally, if I got into trouble early, I could always stop between 8 and 9 miles, when the course went through downtown. From there it would be a short walk back to the hotel.

The plan worked. We ran a pace between 10:30 and 11:00 and occasionally took walking breaks. For the first five miles, we averaged 12 minutes per mile. As Shannan's asthma started to bother her, we did more walking, but she was always on a pace to beat her PR.

When we reached the split at 12.4 miles, I was feeling pretty good, so I committed to finishing the marathon. I knew Shannan would set a PR, but I wouldn't get to see it, so I asked her to post her time on Facebook. I had noticed that the walking breaks were making my compression wrap come loose and ride down, so I stopped to adjust it and also tightened it a bit. It was snug enough to be just a little uncomfortable, but I knew that would force me to continue running slowly. From that point, I stopped taking walking breaks. My mile times ranged between low 10s and low 11s for the rest of the race.

I discovered during the second half of the race that the out-and-back segments gave me great opportunities to see many of other runners I knew, most of whom were running at a faster pace.

I had heard a rumor that this race had martini stops, and I saw one between 15 and 16 miles. Since I was well-hydrated and wasn't trying for a fast time, I figured I had nothing to lose. I can add "drinking a martini during a race" to my list of marathon experiences. I later learned there had been a mimosa stop at mile seven, but I never noticed it.

Throughout the late miles, I enjoyed recognizing friends and cheering all the other Marathon Maniacs. My leg felt a little uncomfortable, but I was pretty sure that was just from having the wrap so snug. When I got to the 23 mile aid station, I saw a big BEER sign. I remembered seeing the same sign when I was going the other direction. I knew it was at the same aid station that had the martinis, so I ran past the beer, and had another martini instead.

I eventually finished in 5:12:44. Although that's one of my slowest marathon times, I was very happy with it. I finished the marathon, and as far as I can tell, my hamstring is no worse off. I ran faster than my time from Lost Dutchman, even though I started the race with the attitude that anything under the seven hour cutoff would be a good race.

After I got back to the hotel and got cleaned up, I spent some time in the rooftop hot tub, where I traded stories with other runners. Later than evening, I got together with my friends from Augusta for dinner and drinks. At 10:30, I opted to go back to the hotel and sleep, rather than continue bar hopping. I probably missed out on some good times, but I needed to fly home in the morning.

Deb didn't get to have her New Orleans vacation, so I'm sure we'll be back.