

## **New York City by David Holmen**

### **November 2011**

On November 6, 2011, I ran the New York City Marathon. It was the second time I've done this race. In 1989, Deb and I traveled to New York with ALARC. On that trip, we did lots of sightseeing and shopping, and we saw a Broadway musical. This year, I was traveling by myself, so I planned to mostly spend time with friends. As it turned out, this trip was also about overcoming adversity.

My goal for this race was to beat 3:30, so I could get a Boston qualifier in New York. A few months ago, that would have been relatively easy, but in the weeks leading up to this race, I had my doubts.

After the Wisconsin Dells Marathon two weeks earlier, I was finally confident that I was fully recovered from my hamstring injuries, but I was nowhere close to peak shape. It wasn't until six days before the race that I finally had a training that wasn't either really slow or really tiring. The next day, I started coming down with a cold.

It wasn't a very bad cold, but I also wasn't able to shake it. I knew it would slow me down, but I didn't know by how much.

Instead of staying at a hotel, I stayed at the Westside YMCA. I never would have thought of this option, but my friend May was staying there. The room rate was about 1/3 of the cost of a Manhattan hotel, and it didn't have the hefty hotel taxes. For a three night stay, that was a savings of several hundred dollars. The accommodations were a bit Spartan compared to a hotel, but that was OK with me. It was conveniently located near the southwest corner of Central Park, so it was within walking distance of the marathon finish line. It was also close to two subway stations.

My flight arrived around 5:30 PM on Friday. By the time I got to the YMCA it was close to 6:30. I had dinner plans with some friends at 8:00, and I figured I would need to leave by 7:30 to get there on time. That allowed me enough time to get a room, unpack a few things, and still leave a little early, so I would have time to get oriented to the subway system.

I noticed it was warm in the room. Actually, the entire building seemed warm – way too warm for me to be able to sleep. The windows were screwed shut, so the only way to cool down the room was to turn on the air conditioner. I turned on the AC, but it didn't seem to be working. The fan was on, but the air coming out wasn't cold. I had to wait for someone from maintenance to come to fix it. He eventually concluded that there was nothing he could do, and recommended switching to another room.

By now, I realized I was going to miss dinner with my friends, but if I didn't resolve this now, I wouldn't be able to sleep later. I got another room, and turned on the air conditioner. It seemed to be working, so I set out my alarm clock, which has a built-in thermometer, and I had dinner at a restaurant a few blocks away. When I got back from dinner, I saw May in the lobby. Although I missed dinner with other friends, I got to spend some time with her, and I met her husband, Ron.

When I eventually got back to my room, I was disappointed to discover that the room was only a few degrees cooler. The air conditioner was clearly blowing cold air, but the room was still about 80 degrees after two hours. When I stepped into the hallway, it was noticeably warmer. It must have been at least 85 degrees in the hallway.

I have trouble sleeping if it's as warm as 70 degrees, but I stripped all the covers off the bed and tried to get to sleep. Then I discovered that if I moved too much, the ceiling light would turn on. It was activated by a motion sensor. I tried to keep still, but before I could fall asleep, I would move enough

for the light to turn on again. This went on and on, until I eventually got up and covered the motion sensor with duct tape. That solved the problem, but by this point I was wide awake.

Because I was well hydrated and had some beer with dinner, I could only lie awake for so long before I needed to make a trip to the bathroom. The rooms didn't have private bathrooms. I needed to walk a short distance down the hallway. The lights in the hallways and bathrooms were so bright, that after each trip to the bathroom, I was wide awake again. This also went on and on. I think I drifted to sleep once, but only for about 10 minutes.

The next day, I was a wreck. In addition to the cold, I was so tired, I felt frail. It was hard to imagine running in this condition.

I got up and showered, so I could meet May for breakfast. We had a nice visit, and then I went back to the YMCA to see if they could do anything about the room. At first, they were going to turn off the heat in the room. Then they discovered the radiator valve was already completely shut. The room was getting that hot just from the heat of the surrounding rooms.

At 10:30 there was a group photo of Marathon Maniacs at the finish line. It was only a few blocks away, so I walked over there with May and got to see several familiar faces. It took a while for the group to get organized, but we took several group photos. When we were done, I went to the expo and picked up my race packet. I spent about half of the afternoon at the expo. Then I went back to the YMCA and organized all my clothes for the race (including warm-ups for my drop bag and throwaway warm-ups to wear after dropping off the drop bag). I would've had time to do some sightseeing, but it was starting to cool off, and I felt so sickly that I didn't want to be outside for too long.

Eventually, I left to join some friends for dinner. Hideki Kino made arrangements for a few of us to join his charity team for their prerace dinner. I must have been pretty quiet at dinner because I was asked a few times how I was feeling. To be honest, I couldn't imagine how I was going to run a Boston qualifier. The one thing I had going for me was that I never entertained thoughts of failure. I didn't seem like I was up to it, but I was determined to do it anyway.

I got back to the YMCA later than I expected, and I was exhausted. I had been careful not to overhydrate, so I wouldn't be making frequent trips to the bathroom. I got about five hours sleep that night. It was about four hours more than I expected, so I was happy with that. I actually felt somewhat rejuvenated. I didn't feel great, but I no longer felt like I was at death's door.

The New York City Marathon is a great race, but one negative is that you need to get to the starting area really early. I met May at 5 AM, and we took the subway to the library to catch a 6:00 bus to the start. Although we got to the library early, they were already filling buses, and we were on a bus by 5:30.

Although the race is still basically the same as it was in 1989, I started noticing subtle differences. In 1989, the bus took us through New Jersey to get to Staten Island. This year, we went through Brooklyn, and crossed the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. It was nice to get a preview of the bridge we would run on for the first two miles of the race.

When we arrived at Fort Wadsworth, we each made a quick bathroom stop in the central area before finding our way to the start village for the Green start. (There are three start groups, and each one has its own start village.) One advantage of getting there early was that there were still lots of open space on the grass. We staked out a spot that was centrally located and spread out two Mylar

blankets that May brought. We were going to be there for a few hours, so it was important to get comfortable.

I expected the start village to get very crowded, but it wasn't too bad. Since I hadn't had breakfast yet, I had a bagel and my first of two cups of hot cocoa. (Coffee, tea, water and Power Bars were also available.) Despite the large number of runners, the number of port-o-lets was more than adequate, so lines weren't very long. I made one bathroom stop for each cup of cocoa, but never had to wait for more than a few minutes.

At first, it was chilly, and I wore three layers. One was my actual running clothes, one was a set of warm-ups that I could throw away, and one was the set of warm-ups that needed to go into my drop bag for after the race. We each had to drop off our bag 90 minutes before our wave start, but by then, it was sunny enough that I was comfortable with just two layers.

About an hour before my wave was scheduled to start, I left May and headed to the staging area for my corral. I needed to be there at least 45 minutes before my wave started, or I would be required to wait for the next wave. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the staging areas were roomy that I could sit down, and there were more port-o-lets.

When it was finally time to walk out to the starting line, I threw my warm-ups in the donation bin. It was still about 25 minutes until the start, but as long as I stood in the sun, I was warm enough.

While I had dreaded the long wait at Fort Wadsworth, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I was comfortable, well fed, and never had to be on my feet for too long. The assigned corrals made lining up for the start very orderly. In 1989, by contrast, it was sort of a free-for-all, and if you waited too long to line up, it was too crowded to move closer.

When other runners found out I had done this race 22 years ago, they all told me it would be a whole different experience now because the race had grown so much. Ironically, I found that the race actually seemed smaller. In 1989 there were only 25,000 runners, but we all started at the same time. This year, there were 47,000 runners, but only 1/3 of them would be in each wave. With the three waves separated by 30 minutes each, the race was less crowded.

As we were about to start, I started to feel optimistic. In that moment, I tuned out how miserable I had felt the past few days, and I told myself I was ready to race. To beat 3:30, I needed to average 8 minutes per mile. When the cannon went off, I did the first mile (all uphill) in 7:47. I did the second mile (all downhill) in 6:59. Then as we entered Brooklyn, I settled into the 7:10 to 7:15 range. I was running surprisingly fast, I felt surprisingly good, and I got surprisingly overconfident. I was on pace for 3:10. I knew I would eventually slow down, but I was of the delusion that I might be under 3:15.

The Brooklyn crowds were just as I remembered them. The first spectators we passed yelled "Welcome to Brooklyn!" After that there were kids lined up at the curb wanting to high-five any runner who would oblige. Then I started to notice the different character of each neighborhood. On this part of the course, you feed off the energy of the crowd. It's easy to get sucked into a fast pace, and I was doing it again, just like I did in 1989.

The next noticeable hill was the Pulaski Bridge, which took us into Queens. By now, my mile times were slowing to the 7:30 range. I didn't worry too much because it seemed like I was slowing down very gradually, and the slower pace would be more sustainable. I could already see the Queensboro Bridge, and I was bracing myself for the long gradual climb over the East River.

When I got to the bridge, I immediately noticed a difference between the current course and the one I ran in 1989. We used to run on the side of the bridge, and the entire length was covered with a red carpet, so we wouldn't have to run on the steel grate. Now, the course is on the roadway. While it's a wider running surface, I miss the carpet. It was one of the things that made this race unique.

Halfway across the bridge, we reached the 15 mile mark, and I noticed I had slowed to 8:17 for that mile. I expected to be a little slower going uphill, but this was a 42 second difference. About that time, I was passed by the 3:15 pace group. They passed me rapidly, and I realized I would be hard pressed to stay with them. Even more troubling was my next split. I did the downhill side of the bridge in 8:07. I realized I was coming unglued. It suddenly dawned on me that I could easily have run 3:30 with sensible pacing, but I might have thrown it away by starting so fast.

I was looking forward to getting a boost of energy from the loud crowds on 1st Avenue, but they weren't nearly as loud as I remembered. It seemed like there were just as many people as there used to be, but they weren't all screaming. I'm not sure what changed over the years. It was as if all the New Yorkers had been replaced by Midwesterners.

For the rest of the race, I couldn't keep pace with the runners around me, so I had to push myself to maintain whatever pace I could. At this point, I could afford to average 8:30 the rest of the way, so each 8:15 was a victory.

The Bronx was surprisingly lively. In 1989, most of the buildings were boarded up, and there were very few spectators. Now, there was music and cheering. My pace was slowing to 8:30, but I could now afford to run 9s.

As we re-entered Manhattan, I eventually focused on one runner who was about 100 feet ahead of me. His shirt said Liam, and I forced myself to stay within sight of Liam so I wouldn't keep slowing down. I followed him most of the way up the gradual hill from 23 to 24. Then he stopped to walk, and I passed him. Suddenly, I didn't have a plan for keeping myself moving. That mile was slower than 9 minutes, but a quick calculation told me a 10 minute pace over the last 2.2 would bring me in just under 3:30.

It didn't take long before Liam passed me again. The next time he took a walking break, I said, "Come on Liam, you can break 3:30." The encouragement worked, and he immediately started running again. It was win-win. I encouraged him, and he led me to the finish. I actually sped up the rest of the way, finishing in 3:26:49. I got my Boston qualifier, despite my cold, despite the lack of sleep, and despite pacing myself recklessly. I was relieved.

It took a while to move through the finish area and get back to the YMCA. After getting cleaned up, I called my friend Shannan. I first met Shannan and about 27 of her friends at the Tobacco Road Marathon. Several of them came to New York to run either the marathon or the 5K race. After meeting them at their hotel, I joined them for drinks and appetizers. Then we went to another restaurant and had dinner, more drinks and lots of laughs. It was the perfect way to end the weekend.