

Salmon ID and Bozeman MT September 8-9, 2012 by David Holmen

On the weekend of September 8-9, 2012, I ran marathons in Salmon, ID and Bozeman, MT. Idaho was one of the states where I had not yet run a Boston qualifier, and Steve Miller recommended the Salmon Marathon as a good choice for Idaho. It's a mostly downhill course in a scenic valley near the continental divide. Salmon is a four hour drive from Bozeman. When I found out the Bozeman Marathon was the same weekend, I realized this was not only a chance to run a Boston qualifier in Idaho, but also a second chance to run a marathon in Bozeman. Several years ago, I did the Lewis and Clark Marathon, but I was overdressed and struggled badly as I overheated in the late miles. I wanted a do-over.

My travel plan was to fly into the Bozeman airport on Friday, drive into town to pick up my race packet for the Bozeman Marathon, then immediately drive to Salmon. If I didn't get there in time to pick up my race packet for the Salmon Marathon, I could rely on picking it up the morning of the race. Then I could drive back to Bozeman after the race without any worries about getting there in time for packet pickup. As it turns out, the Bozeman Marathon was also allowing race morning packet picket, but the website had previously indicated they wouldn't.

In the weeks leading up to this trip, I discovered these two races had something unexpected in common. Both were threatened by smoke from nearby forest fires. About two weeks before the Salmon Marathon, I got an email from the race director indicating nearby fires were affecting the air quality, but the race would not be cancelled. Instead, if individual runners chose not to run because of the smoke, they could defer their entry to 2013. A few days before the race, I checked the weather forecast for Bozeman, and Yahoo Weather described the current conditions as "smoke." I checked the Bozeman Marathon website, and saw a notice that they had also decided not to cancel the race. Until then, I didn't even know that was a possibility.

Having already paid for both races plus my airfare, I decided to fly to Bozeman and hope for the best. After reading forest fire updates for both Montana and Idaho, I was reasonably confident I could run at least one of the races. Conditions in Bozeman seemed to be improving, but Salmon was still a concern. I saw a news story about two small towns north of Salmon being evacuated. It included pictures of homes burning along a stretch of US 93 about 20 miles north of Salmon. This highway was part of my planned route from Bozeman to Salmon. In addition to air quality, I also had to worry about road closures.

In the days leading up to the races, I was in touch with a few other runners who were also doing both races. As we discussed travel plans, it seemed like as many as five of us might be able to carpool. Eventually, it worked out best to split up into smaller groups. I shared a car with Keith Schlottman. Keith arrived in Bozeman on Thursday and was able to pick up both of our race packets Friday at noon. Keith met me at the Bozeman airport an hour later and we left for Salmon. It was nice to be able to share the driving, and I also enjoyed Keith's company.

As we left Bozeman, I could see that there was a little bit of haze obstructing the views of the mountains. Although I couldn't smell the smoke, Keith said he could smell it during his overnight stay in Bozeman. For most of our drive, we had clear skies, but as we approached the mountains along the Montana-Idaho border, they were obscured by a very noticeable haze.

When we crossed the continental divide and got onto US 93, the smoke was like a light fog. As we entered the worst stretch, I could not only smell the smoke, but my eyes and throat started to sting. The late afternoon sun was still high in the sky, but it was a bright red-orange that reminded me of a sunset.

When we got to Salmon, I could still see a light haze in front of the mountains, but the smoke no longer bothered me. We went to Island Park to pick up our race packets, and the volunteers said the air in town had been improving all week and this was the best day so far. Since the marathon course was a point-to-point route that starts south of Salmon, I was now reasonably confident that air quality along the course would be tolerable. While we were there, we got to see the finisher medals and the awards. The finisher medals were in the shape of salmon on thin ribbons. The awards were hand-made metal sculptures of salmon.

Keith and I both stayed at the Stagecoach Inn, which was the headquarters hotel for the race. The Stagecoach Inn was a short walk from the finish line. Buses to the start left from this hotel, and it was also the site of race morning packet pickup for runners who arrived later.

We had dinner with several other Marathon Maniacs at a restaurant in Salmon. One was Regina Joyce, who ran in the 1984 Olympic Marathon. To the best of my recollection, I had never met an Olympian before.

On Saturday, the air quality was better than Friday. I could see some haze when I looked at the mountains, but I couldn't smell any smoke. I was very glad the race director didn't cancel the event.

The race started outside a one room school house that was still in use. The temperature was in the mid-40s, so it was nice to be able to wait inside before the race. On a table, there were several letters to the runners written by the students. One of them said to watch out for skunks and wolves. I never saw any skunks or wolves during the race, but I did see cows, sheep and goats.

To get a Boston qualifier, I needed to run a time under 3:30. My plan was to run just hard enough to beat 3:30, but save something for the next day. The course descends over 900 feet from start to finish, and much of the downhill was in the early miles, so I started kind of fast. The course runs through a valley, but unfortunately, our views of the mountains were diminished somewhat by the haze. Although mostly downhill, the course was punctuated with a few short uphill. I had to slow down on the hills because of the elevation, but always returned to a fast pace on the downhills.

Late in the race, the course leveled out and my fast pace started to wear on me. Somewhere around 22 miles, Regina caught up to me, and I picked up my effort to keep up with her. After about a mile, I decided her pace was too fast for me, and I should ease up and save something for the next day. Running alongside an Olympian for a mile was thrilling.

I finished in 3:24:37. I just missed placing in my age group. Keith, who finished in 3:19, placed second in his age group. Regina placed second overall among the women.

After the awards ceremony and a quick lunch, Keith and I drove back to Bozeman. As we drove north on US 93, we could see a noticeable improvement in the air quality. Clearly, we lucked out on the smoke. I later learned that as recently as Thursday, the mountains were completely hidden by smoke and there was ash falling in Salmon.

When we got to Bozeman, we saw the familiar haze in front of the mountains. After what we encounter near Salmon, the air quality in Bozeman didn't worry me. I couldn't smell any smoke in Bozeman, although I may have been desensitized by the smoke near Salmon.

The Bozeman Marathon also had a point-to-point course that started in a remote area and finished downtown. There wasn't a host hotel, but all of the hotels were close to downtown and there was ample parking.

On Sunday morning, we parked a few blocks from the finish line and caught the bus to the start. There were several runners who did both races. I recognized runners from the day before, and I also recognized a few runners I've met at various other races. It seemed like Salmon was the place to make new friends and Bozeman was the place to reunite with old friends.

The weather was nearly ideal. It was mid-40s at the start and would warm into the low 60s by the time I finished. The only thing I didn't like was the cold wind we encountered at the starting line. Since there was no building to take shelter, we all froze as we waited for the race to start. Fortunately, when we started running, the wind was at our back. I was never cold after the start of the race.

The wind helped me get off to the fast start, but after two bathroom breaks in the first six miles, I realized that I would have to forget about trying for 3:30. As we started a long gradual uphill section, I found that I not only couldn't run eight minute miles, but I also was unable to run nine minute miles. It wasn't a steep grade, but the 5000-foot elevation and my fatigue from the first race made it seem like a mountain.

I can't honestly say if we had nice views of the mountains. I was working so hard, that I never really looked around. I do, however, remember smelling a skunk.

Just before the halfway point, the gradual uphill gave way to a gradual downhill. For a while it was easier, but eventually I was still working hard to stay under nine minute miles. I was overjoyed when I finally turned onto Main Street in the last half mile and could see the finish line. I ran hard for the last few blocks and finished in 3:53:58. Keith was waiting for me after having finishing in 3:41. Although we were both slower on the second day, we each placed second in our age groups. Unfortunately, only the top finisher in each age group got an award.

I give myself a mixed review for the weekend. I met my goal of qualifying for Boston in the Salmon Marathon, but I'm disappointed with the way I struggled in Bozeman. I still can't say I've had a strong race there, but at least this time I was under four hours.