

Surf City in Huntington Beach CA by D.Holmen
February 2012

On February 5, 2012, I ran the Surf City USA Marathon in Huntington Beach, CA. I chose this race because I noticed a lot of my friends were doing it, and I realized that I had never done a race in southern California. It also helped that I was able to get a reasonable airfare on a nonstop flight to the Orange County airport.

The race starts and finishes at the beach. There were hotels right next to the start/finish area that would have been very convenient, but they were also very expensive. I stayed at the Doubletree Club near the airport. I got a good rate there, and they also provided a lot of services for people doing the race, including free shuttles to and from the race and an early breakfast on race day.

There are several parking lots along the beach, but nowhere near enough for all the runners (2,000 in the marathon and 18,000 in the half marathon). I was originally planning to arrive early and park. Since the marathon started at 6:30 and the half marathon didn't start until 8:00, I assumed if I arrived by 5:30, I would be able to find parking.

The night before the race, I had dinner with some friends who have done this race several times before, and they informed me that many of the half marathon runners would also arrive early for parking and the lots would be full by 5:30. When I got back to the hotel, I signed up to take the 5:30 shuttle.

Traffic was slow and the shuttle didn't get to the Hyatt (the host hotel) until 6:00. That gave me plenty of time to make a bathroom stop inside the hotel, drop off my gear bag and line up in the correct corral. Unfortunately, I had to miss the Marathon Maniac group photo. That's a shame, because that was my best chance to see several friends who I might not see along the course.

The weather was beautiful. The temperature at the start was in the upper 40s with clear blue skies and a light breeze. I knew the temperature would get into the 70s later in the day, but I expected to finish before it got that warm.

The course followed the coastal highway for the first 2-3 miles before turning inland. I started with the 3:10 pace group, but after a big downhill around 4-5 miles, I settled into a faster pace, and before long I was running about 2 minutes ahead of them.

After winding through town for the first half of the race, we got back to the coastal highway. First we did a long out and back on the road. Then we turned onto a paved bike path along the beach, where we did another long out and back. We had several miles to watch waves breaking along the beach while being serenaded by surf music. I don't usually get excited by music along the course, but I like it when there's a consistent theme.

In the late miles, I struggled to maintain my pace, and I wondered if the 3:10 pace group would reel me in. With 2 miles to go, I passed some speakers that were blasting a recording of "Surfin' Bird." That got me fired up and I dug deep to maintain the pace a little longer. One of the 3:10 pacers caught up to me and briefly passed me, but I was able to catch up when he stopped for water at the last aid station. After that, I was able to stay just ahead of him.

I finished in 3:09:32. I later learned that I was 5th in my age group. (They had awards for the top 5 in each age group.)

The finisher medals are small wooden surf boards with a more tradition round medal fastened to them. It's one of the coolest medals I've seen. The age group awards were similar designs, mounted on plaques. The race shirt is a long sleeve tech shirt with a nice design, but without any of the ads that spoil many otherwise nice shirts.

When the post- race shuttle returned us to the hotel, the hotel staff was lined up in the lobby to applaud us as we entered the hotel. They also had tubs full of water bottles on ice.

After getting cleaned up and relaxing in the whirlpool, I watched the Super Bowl with other runners in the hotel lounge.

This is a race that I highly recommend. It's a fun, well-organized race along a beautiful beach. Although there wasn't a wide variety of scenery, the out-and-back segments gave us opportunities to see both faster and slower runners. The staggered starts make it possible for the marathon and half marathon to co-exist without getting in each other's way.

I'm told it can be worth the money for the convenience of staying at a hotel along the beach, but I was very happy with the Doubletree Club.