

Surf City Huntington Beach CA by David Holmen

February 2013

On February, 3, 2013, I ran the Surf City Marathon in Huntington Beach, CA. I had fun at this race last year, so I decided to do the same race again. Since I don't need to be as concerned with running in different states this year, I have more freedom to go back to races I've enjoyed in the past. The weather in southern California is a nice escape from winter in Minnesota.

Last year, I flew into the Orange County airport and stayed at a Doubletree near the airport. I liked that hotel, so my plan this year was to do the same thing. When I booked my flights, Delta still had two daily non-stop flights from Minneapolis to Orange County. Unfortunately, they later changed their flight schedule, and now they only have a non-stop flight in the evening. There weren't any reasonable connections that would get me to Orange County airport in time to drive to the expo, so I ended up switching to a non-stop flight into Los Angeles. The flight times were roughly the same, but I had to drive farther. Even though I was flying into a different airport, I still stayed at Doubletree.

This race is one of the few I've done that will mail your race packet for a small fee. Had I known I couldn't get a morning flight to the closest airport, I would have done that. I chose instead to pick up my race packet at the expo. There are hotels across the street from the beach, but they're very expensive, so the expo and the race were my only opportunities to see the beach. The expo is also an opportunity to bump into friends.

To save time, I drove directly from the airport to the expo. This was my first time driving in Los Angeles, so I wasn't sure how bad the traffic would be. That was the most pleasant surprise of the trip. Even though it's about 40 miles, I drove from the airport to the expo in less than an hour. By contrast, last year it took me well over an hour just to drive to the expo from my hotel, which is about 12 miles away. I now know for future reference that driving to the beach along Pacific Coast Highway is a nightmare, but traffic on Beach Boulevard isn't bad.

The expo is held in a large tent in the parking lot for the beach. There were numerous volunteers directing traffic in the parking lot, so people arriving could find the empty parking spots quickly and efficiently. After picking up my race packet, I stayed a while to visit with friends before eventually driving the rest of the way to the hotel. After checking into my room at Doubletree, I joined several other Marathon Maniacs for an early dinner at Buca di Beppo.

The Surf City Marathon has a fairly fast course. Last year I had my fastest time of the year there. With that in mind, I had been doing more speedwork to get into shape to run fast. Three weeks before this race, I did a very intense set of intervals. I felt OK at the time, but the next day my right hamstring felt tight and slightly inflamed. After a few rest days, I ran well at the Louisiana Marathon, but my hamstring continued to bother me. My emphasis leading up to this race was rest and recovery. I knew I wouldn't be as fast as last year, but it was hard to give up entirely on running fast.

The forecast was for an overnight low of 55, but when I woke up it was already 60 degrees. Since it was going to be sunny, I decided not to bother with a gear bag. It was warm enough that I wouldn't need an extra layer either before or after the race.

Doubletree provided busses to and from the race. They also had an early breakfast starting at 4:30. I got up at 4:00 so I could stretch and eat breakfast before catching the bus at 5:30. The bus dropped us off in front of the Hyatt a few minutes after 6:00. From there, we just had to walk around the building to get to the start. Unfortunately, I just missed the Marathon Maniacs group photo.

Since I knew my hamstring wasn't 100%, I started slowly and gave myself a minute or two to ease into my pace. I felt OK, so once I got up to speed, I gave myself the green light to run close to the 3:15 pace group. In the early miles, this pace took an effort, so I assumed I would eventually need to ease up a little.

After running alongside the beach for about two miles, we turned inland. About four miles into the race, we reached a long downhill, and for the first time I found it easy to stay on pace. The next few miles were through Huntington Beach Central Park. At one point, the road through the park had several short turns, and I sped ahead of the pace group so I could run the tangents without having to worry about bumping into other runners. I expected them to reel me back in, but I suddenly found the pace to be surprisingly easy. Even on the hill between eight and nine miles, I kept pulling away. I didn't realize it at the time, but the wind was at our backs on this section, making the pace feel deceptively easy.

At 10 miles, we got back onto Pacific Coast Highway to begin the first of two long out-and-backs along the beach. We had a light cross-wind that felt good. I worked hard to maintain my pace on the first out-and-back on the highway. This is my favorite part of the course. Going out, I was watching waves crash on the beach. Coming back, I recognized several friends who were on the outbound leg.

At 16 miles, we turned onto a paved bike path on the edge of the beach. By now, the pace was getting more difficult and I was also starting to get hot. The bike path is lower than the highway, and I no longer felt the breeze.

At 17 miles, the 3:15 group caught up to me. I tried to stay with them, but I could only stay with them for another mile. After that, I just tried to keep them in sight. At 19 miles, I saw the Beer and Bacon Station. I missed this informal aid station in 2012, but this time I saw the big sign and smelled the bacon. At the time, I was still working hard to stay on pace, so I didn't stop. I knew I would get a second chance on the way back.

By the time I reached the last turnaround, I was struggling to keep running at any pace. I'm not quite in good enough shape to maintain a 3:15 pace, and the warm weather also took a toll on me. On the return trip, I did my best to encourage runners who were still outbound. When I reached the Beer and Bacon Station again, I stopped to partake. I've had beer stops at other races, but it's the first time I've had bacon during a marathon.

The last few miles were tough, but I kept moving and eventually finished in 3:22:47. Along the way, I cheered on anyone who was finishing strong.

The finisher medals again had a cool surf board design. I didn't need a Mylar blanket to keep warm, but I grabbed one anyway. It came in handy later. There was a variety of food at the finish area, as well as coconut water.

I walked around to the front of the Hyatt to catch a bus back to Doubletree. When I realized the first bus wouldn't leave for 30 minutes, I went into the hotel to use the bathroom. After a race, a real bathroom with sinks is a luxury. Before boarding the bus, I tied the Mylar blanket around my waist so I wouldn't get the seat dirty with my sweaty running clothes.

When we reached the Doubletree, I knew what to expect, but the other runners had no idea what was coming. Just like last year, the staff of the hotel lined up on either side of the lobby to applaud us as we entered the hotel. They also gave us each an ice cold water bottle and a one of their signature cookies.

After a shower, I spent the early afternoon in the pool and hot tub with other runners. Later a few of us went to the hotel restaurant to watch the Super Bowl and have dinner. There was a younger group of runners at the bar who started the celebration early. After a few rounds of drinks they were more entertaining than the game.

Monday morning, I had to drive back to Los Angeles to catch my flight home. I got my first real taste of L.A. traffic that morning, but it wasn't a problem because I allowed more than enough time to get there. After a long weekend in sunny California, I hated to return home to snow and cold weather.

This was my second consecutive Surf City Marathon. If I do the race again next year, I'll join the Longboard Legacy Club. If I do, you can bet that I'll stay at Doubletree again. On the flight home, I saw an ad for the OC Marathon in an issue of Marathon & Beyond. I'm tempted to do the Beach Series Challenge by running the Surf City, OC and Long Beach marathons all in one year. This year, the OC and Long Beach marathons both conflict with other races I've already entered, but it's something to keep in mind for next year.