

Tijuana by David Holmen July 2013

On July 28, 2013, I ran Maraton de Tijuana in Tijuana, Mexico. I first heard about this race from friends living in southern California who said there was a free marathon in Tijuana. Since there was no entry fee, I assumed it was a small low key event. It's actually a fairly big race with 500 runners in the marathon and another 2500 in the half marathon. It's a well-organized, fully supported race with over 80,000 pesos in prize money. The race is sponsored by the city of Tijuana.

Through Facebook, I got in touch with other runners in California who have been doing this race for a few years. They drive to the border, park their cars in a secure parking lot, walk through the border crossing, and then take a cab to their hotel. This year, I joined them, except I had to fly to San Diego first. It's possible to fly directly to Tijuana, but it's much more expensive.

Friday after work, I flew to San Diego. I spent Friday night in a downtown hotel that had a free airport shuttle, so I didn't need to rent a car. I arrived late, so I tried to get to sleep right away, but I had trouble sleeping. I only got about two hours of sleep that night.

Saturday morning I tried to sleep in, but my body was still on central time, so I couldn't get back to sleep after 5:30. I had a good breakfast at the hotel, which helped. When I'm tired, I always feel better after a meal. Around 11:00, I met Jesus and Juan who stopped to pick me up on their way from Los Angeles. Before leaving San Diego, we stopped at a grocery store to pick up Gatorade and some snacks for breakfast. I already had two bottles of water.

Crossing the border into Mexico is quick. You press a button to see if you're randomly selected to have your bags inspected. If not, you're waved through. They didn't even look at our passports. From there, we took a cab to our hotel. Taxis in Tijuana are inexpensive, so we took one whenever we went more than a mile from our hotel.

Our hotel was only two blocks from the start and finish and was also close to picket pickup. After checking in, we picked up our race packets. We also picked up packets for a few other runners who joined us later in the day. Next we had lunch at Giuseppe's, where we had a huge lunch that included bread, pizza and pasta. The pizza was a Mexican pizza with meat, chilies and jalapenos. I've never had anything that spicy the day before a race, but I sample pizza wherever I go, and I wanted to try a Mexican-style pizza.

After lunch, we took a cab to the main shopping district, where there are small shops and street vendors up and down the street. This was my first time in Tijuana, but Jesus and Juan have been there several times, so they showed me around.

The race provides a free pasta dinner, but we were still full from lunch, so we went back to the hotel to rest. I tried to take a nap, but I'm rarely able to sleep during the day, and this was no exception. Later, we were joined by two more runners from LA and one from Tijuana, and we went out to dinner. Jesus and Juan introduced me to a local drink called Michelada, which includes beer, tomato juice, lime juice and some spices. It was different from any drink I've tried, yet the flavor seemed vaguely familiar. Later I realized it tasted like chili. It went well with my tortilla soup.

The night before the race, I slept better, but I had to get up early to get ready for the race, so I still didn't get a full night's sleep.

For the second straight week, I was racing after suffering an injury the previous weekend. This time, it was a case of Achilles tendonitis. I first noticed tightness in my left Achilles tendon the previous

Saturday. I stretched periodically on Sunday. For most of that day, it felt OK, but in the evening, it got worse. By Monday morning, I could barely walk.

Aside from continuing to stretch, I treated it by alternately soaking my lower leg in ice water and hot water. I did this for an hour or more at least once a day. I only did two training runs during the week, and they were both short and slow. For the first one, I wore an Achilles tendon support. By the second one, I was ready to test my leg running without any extra support. By Friday, I felt OK. When I was walking around Tijuana, I had a heel lift in my left shoe. For the race, I ran normally.

The previous week, I was recovering from a mild hamstring strain. I knew my right hamstring wasn't 100 percent, but it didn't give me any trouble in my previous race, and I had an extra week to heal.

I met my friends at 6 AM, and we walked to the starting line together. The race started at 6:30. It was 63 degrees, but it was overcast, so it felt comfortable. The temperature was forecast to climb to 70 in the last hour of the race, but that's no worse than the weather in Okoboji a week earlier.

I probably lined up too far back. It took 35 seconds to reach the starting line. It was only after crossing the line that I had any room to run. I didn't see any chip mat at the starting line, so I assumed my official time would include those 35 seconds. When I had room to run, I took off pretty fast. I knew it was probably too fast, because I noticed a little bit of tightness in my hamstring. It wasn't anything serious, but I eased up a bit, just to be safe. I never noticed the first kilometer marker, but I reach 2K in 9:03. That was still much too fast.

At 3K, I saw the first water station. The water was in paper cups, so I wasn't sure if it was bottled water or tap water. I didn't want to take any chances, so I didn't stop to drink. It was humid, and I was sweating profusely, so I knew I couldn't do the whole race without drinking. I drank four glasses of Gatorade before the race, so I was willing to wait until the next aid station.

Over the next few kilometers, I gradually moderated my pace until it felt sustainable. By the time I found the right pace, I was also no longer noticing my hamstring. When I reached the second aid station, I could see that they were using large bottles of water to fill the cups. That aid station also had Powerade. The Powerade was prepackaged in sealed pouches, so I knew it was safe. I took a Powerade pouch, but I noted for future reference, that the water was safe too.

At times, the course took me through neighborhoods I saw the previous day. At other times, it took me through unfamiliar neighborhoods. As with other international races, I enjoyed the panorama of foreign sights, including signs that I couldn't read, but could guess their meaning. In addition to the neighborhoods I ran through, I could also see the surrounding hillsides. I love touring a city by running through its streets. It's even better when it's a foreign city.

The first half of the marathon course was identical to the half marathon course. Then we ran past the half marathon finish line and started another loop that was different from the first one, but would finish along the same street. As I approached the end of the first half, I noticed many of the half marathon runners were picking up their pace to finish strong. I was surprised when one runner, who was accelerating past me, turned out to be doing the marathon.

As I started the second half, I tried to keep this runner in sight. In the meantime, I started passing other runners. I wasn't actually running much faster, but most of the other runners were beginning to slow down. By continually reeling in and passing other runners, I maintained a strong pace in the second half.

With about 10K to go, I noticed it was warming up, and it took more effort to maintain my pace. With 5K to go, it got sunny, and I was struggling to maintain a pace of five minutes per kilometer. Although I was fading a bit at the end, my second half was only about a minute slower than my first half. When I crossed the finish line, I stopped my watch, but I also looked at the digital clock, in case my clock time would be my official time. As it turns out, it was. I finished in 3:25:20. Neither the Achilles tendon nor the hamstring turned out to be a problem.

After we all had time to shower, change clothes and check out from our hotel, we walked back to the finish area to check for results and look at race photos. The half marathon results were posted, but the marathon results weren't up yet. I eventually saw them online.

Crossing the border back into the United States is time consuming. We were expecting a wait of at least two hours. When we got in line, Jesus and Juan both said it started farther back than they had ever seen. Juan estimated it would take more than three hours. Fortunately, the line moved surprisingly fast. At one point, we stood in the same spot for over 15 minutes, but at other times, the line would advance half a block at one time. While we waited, we walked past shops and street vendors, so we had opportunities to buy snacks. When we finally reached the border agents, it went fast. If you're a US citizen, they check your passport and ask one or two questions. In all, it took just under two hours to cross the border.

After getting back to the car, the drive to San Diego went quick. It was midafternoon, so I would have had time to do some sightseeing in downtown San Diego, but my legs were stiff and I was tired. It was only about half a mile to the harbor, but I didn't want to walk that far. My room was on a high floor, and I had a balcony, so I settled for viewing the city from my balcony.

Since my only meals that day had been snack foods and Gatorade, I was getting hungry. I was only a few blocks from Little Italy, so I ventured out to sample pizza and Italian beer in one of the many nearby Italian restaurants. I was too tired to go anywhere else, so I relaxed in my room until I was able to fall asleep. I slept like a rock that night. I could tell I ran hard that morning.

Hopefully, I can get back into some quality training. For the past three weeks, I've done very little training other than my races. An all-out race every weekend can go a long way to help your conditioning, but it's not enough. Without more quality training runs during the week, it's unclear how long I can continue to race well. I came through this race without a new injury, so hopefully my training will get back to normal and I'll go into my next race healthy.