

<http://www.restonrunners.org/index.php/about-us/stats-and-chat-archives/a-tale-of-two-cities.html>

A Tale of Two Cities

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of bitter wind and cold, it was the age of excitement and nervousness, it was the epoch of good luck, it was the epoch of risk, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. It was the start of the 2013 New York City Marathon.

Shivering at the base of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge waiting to make my debut for the New York City Marathon I questioned my sanity for running 2 marathons a week apart but also my good fortune to register for both. After years of trying I finally won a lottery entry into New York, and I was in a New York state of mind. Although I was tired from the previous week's Marine Corp Marathon, I had no injuries and was healthy. I planned to run for the fun of it, the experience, perhaps the chance to craft yet another story, but certainly not for time. Along with the risk injury or strain, the exercise in extremis also offered the chance to do a side-by-side comparison of the two great events.

NYC Marathon is the biggest in the world in terms of participants, spectators, prize money and dare I say it, location too. Although MCM is very large (#9 in the world), for me it still feels like a home town race. For MCM we drove into Arlington but for New York I traveled overnight to the Big Apple, and rose incredibly early for the bus ride out to Staten Island. MCM bills itself "the peoples' marathon" as entry is first-come-first, whereas New York screens its entrants by qualification or lottery. MCM is organized by the Marine Corp, with an attendant emphasis both before and during the race on our uniformed men and women. In contrast, New York's marathon emphasizes trans-national diversity, drawing runners and spectators from every continent. The New York Marathon rightly celebrates the variety of its neighborhoods along the course. New York offers huge prize money and can thus assemble a world-class field of top runners.

New York laid down the red carpet for us. There were welcome signs plastered across the city, and everywhere people greeted the runners with "good luck". Packet pickup and Expo at the Javits Center were the biggest I have ever attended. It was crowded but efficient, and the process worked smoothly with many volunteers available to guide. A nice touch was that many volunteers wore their language skills on their lapels to personally assist the many foreign-born participants. Despite countless thousands of runners, I had my race number and swag bag within a few minutes. The Expo had 100+ vendors plying their wares, as well as many notable athletes granting and preening for interviews. A dupe for the nervous hype in the hall, I bought yet another technical shirt for my collection.

Saturday night we shifted our clocks from Daylight Savings back to Standard Time. I tossed and turned, fretting my alarms would misfire and keep me from making the start. I was nevertheless up by 4am to snack, dress, pack and walk excitedly to Midtown. The weather in the city was mild and comfortable enough that I thought the pre-race advisories to dress warmly constituted false alarms. Runners assembled midtown like fish heading home to spawn. At that time of the morning we had the city to ourselves. The bus logistics worked well, and I was in the start area at Staten Island about 6am. I would have enjoyed another hour or two of sleeping ahead of my 9.40am start, but today was not that day. It was bitterly cold & windy and the tents provided scant shelter.

There were no chairs, no food and no hot beverages to warm us during the long wait. We huddled and shivered in dawn's penumbra. We were frequently scanned, frisked, sniffed and questioned by the omnipresent security. In the meantime, I chatted with runners from Norway, Croatia, Australia, South Africa and Berlin. Old hands advised young pups on how to master the course. The topics of the Boston bombing, Hurricane Sandy and the cold weather peppered the conversation. Event organizers herded, assembled, packaged and sorted runners into colors, corrals and waves. I felt very much like a small widget on a very large production line.

Despite the long wait in the bitter cold, as my start approached, my adrenalin pumped, and my vagabond shoes, they longed to stray. Sinatra's "New York New York" echoed across the start area. Although 46,000 toed the start line, it all flowed well and within 2 minutes I shuffled across its boundary. Running across the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, I saw Downtown Manhattan glistening in the morning like a faraway pearl, knowing we were running its way. The distant Hudson River helped get us in a New York state of mind. The Bridge provided a great vantage of the city spread before us, generating anticipation. Police helicopters whirred constantly around us, making us all feel very VIP-like. Having crossed the Bridge, we were into Brooklyn about Mile 2. The locals had turned out in force to support us. Every few blocks was another band and another street party, with no two alike. The buildings offered some protection from the cold breeze, enabling us to briefly defrost; however, the relief was short-lived, and the rest of the day alternated between frigid wind and comfortably cool. Water stops at least every 2 miles, often more. We ran through Brooklyn's various neighborhoods for about 10 miles; never before had I realized how big, festive or culturally diverse the borough's character.

An area that especially stood out for me was Williamsburg, home to many Hasidic Jews. Entering it was as if penetrating both time and space. The section was quieter, without any music, much less cheering, and for a brief time the only sound was the slap-slap of running feet. The atmosphere was austere and desolate, as expressionless men cloaked in funereal black watched us run by, their thoughts a mystery. Next was a dramatic shift from this sepulchral zone to the pulsating vibrancy and enthusiasm of a Puerto Rican neighborhood.

After Brooklyn we made a turn through Queens, and then at about mile 16 we headed over the Queensboro Bridge - aka 59th Street Bridge. Just kicking down the cobblestones, looking for fun and feeling groovy. Coming down a spiral ramp off Queensboro Bridge and into Manhattan I could hear a dull roar in the distance and it raised my skin in goosebumps. Turning onto 1st Avenue that roar turned into thunder, it was electrifying. 1st Avenue for the next 4 miles was packed with spectators 10-20 deep the entire way. We ran right through the very heart of it, New York, New York. Manhattan is a concrete jungle and the canyons are lined by skyscrapers. By contrast the Marine Corp Marathon can only offer a salient Washington Monument.

Along 1st Ave I was running next to Elvis (or possibly an impersonator) and at some point we collided, stopping my Garmin watch. By the time I realized this and restarted my watch I missed a few minutes and so the rest of the race was an estimate time-wise. We runners have become so tied to our toys, we can't run without them. 1st Avenue was loud and cheerful, lots of noise, music and high fives. A minor annoyance here was the odd spectator crossing the busy course and I had a few near misses. I am sure there were many collisions.

We ran through East Harlem and across the Wills Bridge into the Bronx and its many twists and turns. After the Bronx we ran alongside Central Park and then into the Park proper. This area was uphill and I was struggling. I hit the dreaded wall. The previous weeks Marine Corp, the lack of sleep, 22+ miles and a steep uphill turned my legs to lead. With so many spectators cheering I felt horrible having to walk but my legs won that argument. I felt like a deadbeat walking while others ran by and people cheered so heartily. I wanted to fade into the tarmac. Central Park seemed to last forever and mostly uphill. The finish line was a minor anti-climax as no spectators were permitted. Under the finishers arch and fellow runners, a few volunteers and clicking cameras was our only welcoming committee. After the near constant crowd support from 2 million people along the way, it felt weird to cross the finish line in near silence. MCM was similar in that there were no spectators in the finish area.

After we crossed the finish line we collected our medals, snapped photos, got our food bag and neon orange cape (nice warm coverup). Exiting Central Park entailed a very long walk on tired legs and then moving away from the immediate vicinity was frustrating. Many streets were closed with crowd barriers and it was not obvious how to navigate the area. There were constant bottlenecks. I was tired from the race and simply wanted to get back to my hotel but it took over an hour to get a few blocks away from the finish line.

The best part of the New York City Marathon was the race itself - the sheer extravaganza of the epic event, the incessant crowd support, great logistics management, famous course landmarks and the camaraderie of my fellow 46,000 runners. A highlight of New York was the diversity of the neighborhoods through the 5 boroughs contrasted with the relative homogeneity of Marine Corp. Whereas New York has some great bridge spans to traverse; Marine Corp offers the mundane 14th Street and Key Bridges. The worst part of the race was the prologue and epilogue. Before the race was the endless waiting, shivering and cold, after the race was clearing the area. As an event it was spectacular, as a run it was good. As a lifetime experience of running the biggest marathon in the world, it was mind-blowing. I ran this race a week after Marine Corp and that race was very much in my legs. They were always heavy and dragging. Despite that I ran consistently up to about 22m and then lost steam. Still a decent time at 3.47.44

It was great to know (and later hear from) friends who were tracking me through the race mile by mile. Other Reston Runners who ran were – Jordan A, Mike F, Matt C, Farouk.

Credit to Charles Dickens, Paul Simon, Billy Joel and Frank Sinatra.

My previous article on Marine Corp Marathon is titled “Semper Fi”

<http://www.restonrunners.org/index.php/myblog-admin/semper-fi.html>

and “Call me Trail Runner” on the Holiday Lake 50km February 2013

<http://www.restonrunners.org/index.php/myblog-admin/call-me-trail-runner.html>