

## FIRST BOSTON: Banking on Sub-3

by John Atkinson

AS I stepped out of my Surrey condo block at 4:55am on Friday, April 18<sup>th</sup> and wheeled my new Eddie Bauer carry-on to King George Station in the pitch blackness, my outer focus was centred on making the first *SkyTrain* that morning: the 5:08 service to Waterfront. Miss that and it would throw my travel schedule out of sync. Inside, though, my thoughts were racing – a heady brew of fear and excitement – as I considered what lay in store for me in a little over three days' time. On Monday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 – Patriot's Day in the USA – I would be running the 112<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon.

Above everything else I wanted to enjoy the experience; after all, how many runners get the chance to do Boston? But that was always going to be tough, given I'd lumbered myself with the added pressure of wanting to break 3 hours – for the first time in a marathon – after numerous misfiring attempts. However, thanks to some stellar training partners and coaching, I'd trained like never before during the winter and spring – and felt like I was in the shape of my life. Plus, if I needed any good omens or positive coincidences (and I'd always take 'em), my race number was 3509. The significance? I'd turned 35 four days before the race – and it was my 9<sup>th</sup> marathon. What could possibly stop me?

I arrived at my Boston B&B at 9pm local time, having endured a 13-hour journey, door-to-door. Travelling can be a stressful experience, but the stress level is ramped up 10-fold when you're on the way to pop your Boston Marathon cherry. The first part of the trip was tiring – the *SkyTrain*-bus combo to the airport, negotiation of US Customs and 3.5-hour flight to Chicago. But the second tested my powers of patience and tolerance to the limit. I drew the short straw of a seat in front of a shrieking toddler, whose intermittent glass-shattering screams cleared the wax from my ears and came perilously close to piercing my drums. When he/she (it was hard to tell) wasn't wailing, he/she was bouncing up and down on the back of my seat and soiling his/her pants with gay abandon; aromatherapy it wasn't. Thank goodness the flight was only two-and-a-half hours; any longer and I might have requested the loan of a parachute and headed for the nearest emergency exit.

A soothing night's sleep and replenishing hearty breakfast later, I headed into downtown Boston on Saturday morning to tackle the marathon expo. I've done four Londons and one Chicago, so I knew how these big-race exhibitions worked. After picking up my packet and technical shirt, I headed over to the official merchandise stand. I usually avoid these like a bad case of the 'flu, but this was different; this was Boston. And I wanted the official jacket. Worn like a badge of honour, this is one case of self-indulgence runners can get away with. I sized up, swiped my credit card and then headed to the *Larabar* stand to nab some free samples.

Nailing your nutrition, both before & during the race, plays a huge part in marathon success – so I'm told. Unfortunately, mine hadn't got off to the best start on Friday.

In preparing for the trip, I wasn't sure what food I could take through customs, so I kept it simple – cramming 20 granola bars into every spare crevice of my case. Tackling US Customs (after ticking the food box on the declaration form) had gone something like this:

Customs Officer:       What food do you have?  
Me:                       Granola bars.  
Him:                      How many?  
Me:                       20.  
Him:                      Do you like granola bars or something?  
Me:                       Yes.

I was in no mood for small-talk.

Upon touching down in Chicago, I went in search of more thorough fare – but had to make do with some Asian ‘cuisine’ from the *Sizzling Wok*, in the airport food court. I went for double helpings of fried rice & veg, though I think the latter had been bathed in MSG, as my stomach felt like it had taken a Sizzling Whack later in the day. Saturday started off better, with a full & nutritious breakfast, but then descended down a Newton hill as my food allergies ruled out most of the café offerings at the expo. I kept my carb levels topped up with copious amounts of wheat-free energy bar samples.

In the afternoon I rested my feet by heading to the lecture theatre and soaking up the Boston Marathon Legends’ inspirational tales of yesteryear, before getting some fuelling advice from sports nutrition guru Nancy Clark. In between, I popped out for a quick ‘rest’ and bumped into fellow Brit and wannabe-Vancouverite Ellie Greenwood. Ultra-runner Ellie would go on to make mincemeat of the hills, running 3:07 as a training run – before slicing another 12 minutes off her marathon PB with a 2:55 in Vancouver, 13 days later. In the evening I hooked up with UK friends Andy and Michele and we endured a wild goose chase trying to find a restaurant that didn’t have a 30-min+ wait for a table. Eventually we got in somewhere and I devoured a fancy tuna dish, more rice and ‘sizzling’ mushrooms. I got back to my B&B at 9:30pm. If yesterday was exhausting, today wasn’t far behind.

I decided something had to give on Sunday. Unfortunately that something was the US women’s marathon trials. I actually woke up early enough to catch some of it – and headed out to the ‘T’ station after breakfast. But, after waiting 15 mins and seeing no sign of a train, I decided it wouldn’t be worth it; by the time I got downtown Deena Kastor would be in her hotel hot-tub sipping champagne and planning her Olympic training schedule. I later ventured out locally for lunch. After a series of wide-eyed stares and shoulder shrugs (in response to my allergy story) at several shady-looking eateries, I headed to the nearest Chinese takeaway and ordered a giant portion of steamed rice... and picked up five bananas from Ashmont’s answer to Apu’s Kwik-e-mart. This became my pre-marathon meal.

Early evening, I got all my kit ready; most importantly pinning my race number to my shirt and lacing the timing chip to my right Mizuno Wave Rider 10. My legs felt strange; almost as if they were throbbing with a mixture of excitement and nervous energy. I felt happy I’d done my best to prepare – miraculously I’d managed to avoid catching any kind of illness in the run-up to the race – and my left heel, which had been painful since Thursday, now felt better. I was nervous, of course; but, deep down, confident I could finally shake that Sub-3-hour monkey from my back in the morning.

I slept reasonably well – 4-5 hours is about as good as it gets the night before a marathon – and the meticulous kit preparation, coupled with rising at 4 am, afforded me the luxury of a refreshing pre-race shower. I had my bowl of *Oaty Bites* and rice milk at about 4:30 am and two cups of caffeine-rich *Yerba Mate* tea. I then met three fellow Boston marathoners – also staying at the B&B – out on the porch at 5am and our race day had begun. A 10-minute walk and 20-minute subway train ride later, the four of us hiked our way up onto Tremont St. The buses were already lined up, waiting to ferry us – like prisoners bound for the torture chamber – to the start in Hopkinton. The Carruth House Quartet herded onto one of the first ‘yellow taxis’ and departed around 6am. It took longer than I expected – 45-50 minutes – despite the fact we took something akin to a super-highway. I told the driver the sightseeing could wait. By the time we arrived, I was in desperate need of a portaloos. There’s nothing like the jangling nerves which accompany your first Boston to intensify the need for a toilet break.

The Athlete’s Village was essentially two gigantic tents set up at a high school in Hopkinton to house the mass of nervous energy generated by 25,000 Boston marathoners. Lining two sides of one of the tents were the portaloos; about 20 one side and 30 the other. When we arrived there were no line-ups; two hours later, they were 30-strong. For me, there was no point going back to base-camp after releasing some guests from the foyer; I just joined the end of the queue again. By the time I got to the front, I knew I’d need to go again. In what seemed like no time at all, 9:10am approached and the 14,000 Wave 1 starters were called to make their journey (a 10-minute walk) to the start. Along the

way, I stripped off my secondary layers, yanked a bin-liner over my head to stay warm and stuffed my kit bag full of the sheddings – before lobbing it on to my assigned bus.

As I turned away to continue the journey to the start, I spotted, in my peripheral vision, three or four guys ‘watering the flowers’ in a small copse behind the kit buses. Before you could say Jimmy Riddle, I’d joined the synchronized slashing parade. Well, I’d done the same in Chicago and London, so wanted to uphold one of my major marathon traditions. All was flowing nicely, until a “Hey, you there!”... “And you!”... “Stop that!” cleared some wax from my right ear. A quick glance over my shoulder brought into a view a jobsworth race official/cop about 50 yards away, who thought it was his lucky day. Oops. With slick military efficiency, I replaced my ‘pistol’ in its holster and scurried, head-down, into the mass throng of runners swarming to the start, before *Mr Jobsworth* could reach me. At least four of us got away with it, though I think a fifth may have been a little slow off the mark, as I later heard someone got booked for watering a local resident’s petunias. If that was a garden, it needed a landscaper. There was possibly a silver lining to the ‘victim’s’ cloud, though; the energy he’d saved in not legging it (and that we’d, conversely, expended) may have proved crucial later on.

Confident my *Catch Me If You Can* disappearance had done the trick, I replaced my shades and bin liner and rejoined the procession of nervous anticipation. After reaching the start area, I took a gel, jogged over to the village green for a final – and legal, this time – pitstop and headed into Corral 3. A gaggle of pre-start festivities followed – including the warbling of the US national anthem by a Yankee crooner I’d never heard of. Before we knew it, our MC gave us the five-minute warning (we were due off at 10), at which point the clouds parted and the sun beamed down. It would continue beaming for the next 26.2 miles, turning the many sunscreen-dodgers amongst us (me included) beetroot red. With two minutes to go, one lucky punter was told his timing chip was faulty – and would have to be replaced. As if the whole pre-race deal wasn’t nerve-wracking enough. I imagine he just stuffed it in his shorts and did a ‘Paula Radcliffe crouch’ every time he crossed a timing mat.

“One minute to go,”... “30 seconds,”... “10 seconds,”... and the hooter sounded.

I planned to take it pretty easy for the early downhill miles, mindful of the many stories I’d heard of runners paying later for galloping out of the blocks. Fortunately, it took a while for the swarm of racers to thin out – the road out of Hopkinton was narrow – so I was forced take the early miles at a modest pace. I passed through the Boston suburbs of Ashland, Framingham and Natick without realizing and slipped slightly behind my planned 2:55 pace. I went through 10k in 42:26 – my legs feeling inexplicably lethargic. But I was confident I could push on in Part II and still crack the Magic 3. After high-fiving a dozen screaming Wellesley College girls at the 12-mile mark (if I’d noticed the “Kiss me” signs I’d have probably struggled to break 3:10), I cruised through half-way in 1:29:18 and was still on schedule; though I wasn’t leaving much of a buffer for the latter stages. I maintained a metronomic clip for the next five miles and tackled the Newton hills with relative gusto. After cresting Heartbreak Hill I roared: “Come on!” to a pair of spectators brandishing a “You beat the hill!” placard. I thought the hard part was over; surely I was going to break 3 hours now?

On the face of it, the 5.2-mile final stretch in Boston looks appetizing, as it’s a net downhill – in fact, it’s essentially *all* downhill. However, the reams of earlier descents your quads have negotiated, plus the sharp transition from calf/hamstring to shin/quad muscles can spark rebellion. Add into the mix the fact our bodies aren’t naturally designed to cope with running more than 20 miles and that my ‘during race’ nutrition plan had been scrapped at half-way (the *Gatorade* stations were a circus, so I switched to gels) and I probably should have had cause for concern. But I’d convinced myself I was going to break 3 come-what-may... and thought my blind optimism and brute determination would get me to the finish line with the number 2 still showing on the left side of my stopwatch face.

Unfortunately, fate was following a different script. Just past Mile 21, a small tornado of cramp gusted into my right calf and was quickly joined by flashes of lightning in my right groin and quad. I tried to

run it off and was STILL on course (by seconds) to break 3 after running a decent 6:41 for Mile 24. It was going to be dramatic, but I was welling up inside at the thought of such an achievement. Then the spasm in my right quad became more regular. My pace was slowing again and suddenly the outlook seemed bleaker. I continued forth, determined to shake it off. I passed the 40k mark in 2:50:58 (the exact time Lance Armstrong finished with... swine); I could still do it. Then, as I passed the 25-mile mark... ZAP; my right quad completely seized up.

I'd only ever had twinges of cramp during my previous eight marathons – never a full-blown locking-up of one of the muscles. I pulled over to the side of the road and frantically shook my leg, trying to release the 'offender'. It wouldn't budge. It was stuck and there was seemingly nothing I could do to shift it. And, in that moment, as the vociferous spectators cried out: "Keep going, you've only got a mile to go!", my Sub-3-hour Boston Marathon dream evaporated.

Of course I knew, deep down, this could happen. In the marathon, during those final few miles, anything can. Which helped me, in the moment, put it in perspective – and refocus. Now my biggest concern was, could I finish? After enduring all the hard training, preparation and marathon weekend hullabaloo, it would be devastating to have to drop out with just 1.2 miles to go. I decided to try and run with the cramp. Amazingly, I could. I'd hit the wall big-time, but was able to locate a few loose bricks and punch out a hole big enough to crawl through. As I took off again, the same cluster of spectators who ooohed and aaaahed when I stopped, now cheered and applauded my return to action. To them we were all heroes – particularly at this stage of the race – and it was inspiring.

My pace was now down to about a 9-min/mile shuffle and I was almost in a daze, roared on by the crowds which lined the streets of downtown Boston to the finish, but almost numb to the noise. It's fair to say I was slightly delirious at this point – and I have no recollection of the famous *CITGO* sign (just past the Mile 25 mark) which looms large as a backdrop and is supposedly impossible to miss. I was too busy looking at my watch – and to the heavens, praying for some divine inspiration/assistance (I guess he/she/it was overloaded with requests on the day – and mine was at too short notice).

I shuffled on regardless, just wanting to get it over with now. I turned the final corner, onto Boylston Street, and glanced at my watch: it read 2:59:10. I could see the finish, but now needed to run 385 yards in 49 seconds to break 3 hours. I'd struggle to do that on fresh, full-strength legs. As I soldiered on, I couldn't help but steal fleeting glances at my watch – and remember the moment the hour digit flicked over to 3, with the finish line still 300 yards away. My heart sank. When I eventually stumbled across the line my head was bowed in disappointment; after all the build-up it was a crushing blow. My final time was 3:01:41 – good enough to place me 1,377<sup>th</sup> out of 21,963 finishers. But I'd run the final 385 yards in 2 mins 31... and missed breaking 3 hours by 102 seconds. Arrrrggggghhhhhh!!!

There's no doubt I should be capable of running Sub-3; in fact, Sub-2:50, given the 10k and half times I've posted. But the marathon's a different ball game – perhaps the most challenging of all distances to get right. Running 2 hours something for 26.2 miles just may not be part of my destiny...

...but that won't stop me trying.

The whole Boston experience was immense; stressful and somewhat overwhelming at times, thrilling at others. But, supping a pint of Guinness at the post-race party, my attention was drawn to the two giant TV screens which hung intimidatingly above the dance floor – replaying the men's and women's elite races from earlier in the day. While a Wyclef-Jean look-a-like orchestrated an energetic swaying-of-arms-in-time-to-the-music session (flanked by a brace of professional backing swayers), I was mesmerized watching the Duel in the Sun Mark II finish to the women's race and Kenyan Robert Cheruiyot powering to his fourth – and third successive – Boston Marathon victory in the men's event.

All I could think was: How many days 'til I have the chance to do this all again?