

Chicago was my 9th marathon and my first larger race – prior to Chicago the largest race I had run in had somewhere in the region of 3000 entrants, so it was going to be quite a change and was definitely source a of some mild uncertainty going into the race.

Race prep – my race prep had gone very well with some good long sections at Reach the Beach (RTB) in mid-September where I was able to hold race pace (or close to it) in the later sections of the race when fatigue levels were higher. Our team do RTB as an Ultra race and I had 40 miles to cover over the weekend so there was plenty opportunity to push through some longer sections on tired legs. Getting through that feeling strong and uninjured was a huge boost to my confidence in the weeks before Chicago.

My wife and travelled out on Friday prior to the race and on arrival went straight to the Expo and packet pick up. At the expo the scale of the event began to sink in. It was late in the day Friday and the Expo was still very busy and when you looked around it was clear that despite there being a lot of people there, it was still a small fraction of the total race field – a somewhat scary thought.

On Saturday we walked back to the start line to look around and get a feel for the route to the start – it was less than 30 mins from our hotel and so looked like a fairly easy walk for Sunday morning.

The race organizers had recommended arriving two hours before the start at 7.30, so Sunday was an early start after a terrible night's sleep. Our downtown hotel was on the next block to a fire station so needless to say there were plenty of noisy calls outs throughout the night with siren's blazing as well as car alarms and other city noise which I don't normally get at home in NH. I had invested in some foam earplugs but they were of little use and ultimately fell out as I tossed and turned through the restless night.

The walk to start was easy and with only a small delay for security checks before I was in the race compound. The site was very well laid out and it was easy to get everything done in the ample time available. I made my way to the corral at about 7.15AM ready for the 7.30AM start. My plan had been to get close to the front of the corral but it was a complete zoo once I got in there and so I ended up in the middle of the massive pack.

We then waited..... and waited and waited.... to finally get moving at about 7.45AM. It was a cool going on cold morning, but I was comfortably dressed to withstand the cold – maybe a little over dressed for later in the race but I am generally prepared to live with that.

So once finally underway the plan was to hold 7:10mm pace through the half and then drop it back to a 7.15mm pace with the goal of getting in under 3:10 – this would be nearly a 6 min PR for me so it was a lofty goal.

The first mile was a bit of a pacing train wreck – people everywhere, no clean running route to avoid traffic and probably a little too much excitement around for me to be comfortable with. I seemed to be working hard and not moving fast which is not what you want on mile one of a marathon. I ended up with an 8MM but didn't let that get to me, tried to stay focused and get back on track. Things settled down a bit by mile three but having to deal with race traffic on and off throughout the race was something I was going to have to get used to. Having said that my pace stabilized at slightly below target pace through the

halfway point. Miles 13 to 20 were a little tougher, as they always are, but I held pace well and after 20 was in good shape.

So the marathon really begins at mile 20 as they say – mentally I was in good shape, it felt great to have the solid 20 miles under my belt and I was mentally prepared to start digging in. I managed to hold on to a 7.20 pace through 23 but then began to slip a little – not helped by an emergency pee stop in mile 23. The final three were a real slog – I was well off target pace in the 7:45 range but trying to keep moving forward and trying to draw on the incredible noise and support coming from the crowd in the last miles. Chicago is a beautifully flat course, but the last half mile has the slightest of inclines which I really didn't need at that stage. But up the hill round the corner and it was done....

I ended up at 3:14:15 which I was very pleased with. My primary goal was to get a Boston qual for 2025 (to add to the 2024 qual) and that was comfortably in the bag with a decent buffer. I PR'd my second marathon in a row taking 1 minute 33 off my previous best. I narrowly missed a New York qual time by 15 seconds (which I really should have pushed for..) and was outside the London qual time by 4:15 (I later learned that the London qual times only apply to UK based runners so that would have been a lot of additional effort for bragging rights only so no biggie!!)

The most meaningful goal is to understand the process better and use those lessons to improve. Again, I learned from this race to trust in the process knowing that I had done the work and had the underlying fitness to do well. I was nervous about the fast pace in the first half of the race but was able to hold it comfortably. I got to experience a huge race and work through the additional challenges that such an event brings - Some real, many imagined. The race also reinforced that a lot of the obstacles we face are mental and can be overcome / ignored – lack of sleep, scale of race and interrupted pace. Ignore as best you can, don't dwell on them – keep your head down and keep pushing forward at whatever pace you can.

The other goal was to experience a big race with thousands of competitors from all over the country and all over the world. To share their challenges and triumphs and to witness the joy that it brings to competitors and spectators was something really special. I may have said before this that I was a fan of smaller races but now I am willing to concede that there might be room for both in my future and doing the six world majors is already gnawing on my mind.

What would I do differently – give a realistic finish time and get in the correct corral – a lot of mental and physical energy devoted to battling for position and trying to get a steady rhythm going.

Check hotel locations for proximity to fire stations or get some better ear plugs !!

Thanks as always to Chris for putting up with my whining and helping to remove the seeds of doubt from my mind with his gentle and sometimes not so gentle encouragement.

Now on to the next one...