

Belfast City Marathon

03rd May 2010

Prologue

The last time I was in Belfast was way back in 1987. Then I was there on business, but this time purely for pleasure; if you can call marathon running a form of pleasure that is! It would also for me be interesting to see how the previously troubled province has changed over the years.

Registration

As seems to be the case with marathons in Ireland, the race was on the Monday, rather than Sunday so I arrived in the city on Saturday rather than my normal ploy of arriving on Friday. I arrived around midday which gave me plenty of time to sort out registration. This was inside the grand looking city hall and on collecting my race number the registration desk attendant comments on my bib number; number 48, suggesting that I must be one of the top runners to get such a low number. I was quick to suggest otherwise, offering the more likely cause that I had merely signed up to the race very early!

After registration I visited the rather small expo and dutifully signed my life away to various competitions being run by some of the stall holders. I was then free to explore the city including popping along to the local tourist centre to book a guided bus trip to the Giant's Causeway for Sunday.

Race Day

The morning started with bright sunny weather and clear blue skies; most unusually for Northern Ireland! I arrived early at the city hall for the start and in doing so bumped into Mr Biggs; no not Ronnie, but Roger; the 100 marathon club's own chairman. Roger was 'fresh' if that's the right word to use, from doing the Dorset coastal marathon the day before.

Though it was sunny, there was a chill in the air, so the bin bag was definitely warranted in keeping warm for the start, though the sky did look like the making for a warm day. There was also a delay in allowing people to congregate behind the start line though once we were allowed to congregate, it was all rather civilised; none of the apparent climbing over barriers of Hamburg here.

The wheel chair race started first with the marathon a minute later coinciding with the marathon relay race. A useful touch was that relay runners had an additional bib number on their back, whereas the marathoners didn't, thus allowing you to determine the 'real competition' and not be tempted to speed up as some whippet who only has to do about 10km, storms pass. With things being so organised I found myself starting not too far back from the start line, perhaps a little ahead in the starting field than I planned to be.

The route took us out of the city centre and soon along a long climb. Nothing particularly steep just long and this would be a reoccurring theme throughout the race. Part of the course went through the republican stronghold of Falls Road where a small group of people held up protest banners in what they considered mistreatment of republican prisoners. It was a peaceful demonstration and for

me, I was more concerned with the climb that I and my fellow runners had to contend with on that same road.

The route also took us along side one of the main roads into Belfast. Being a motorway, it wasn't the most scenic bit of the course, but at least it was flat and the chance for me to recover a bit from the earlier undulations. But alas it wasn't long before we were back in undulations territory. The climb pass the midpoint was particularly long and just before halfway the 3:30 pacesetter passes me. Both my watch and the official clock on display suggested he was a bit ahead as he passed the midpoint under 1:44 with me a few seconds after.

Eventually we get to the top of that climb to then have a good mile of downhill for which I made the most of, overtaking many runners who had fared better than me on the previous up. I was even able to keep the 3:30 pacer in my sights, though the idea of matching his pace soon died once beyond the downhill section and back to the more familiar flats and steady climbs.

At any marathon, I regularly take on whatever isotonic drinks are available at the drinks station as well as water and having a few spare energy gels on me 'just in case'. Unfortunately at the some of the drink stations in this marathon there were no isotonic drinks left or they were in short supply with only water generally available and as a result I soon used my 'emergency rations'. In the latter stages I was feeling somewhat more tired than normal and this despite the fact that the clouds were coming in making for a more overcast day.

Another long flat stretch on a footpath to just before the 20 mile mark where two fellow 100 marathon club runners pass me. This moment also coincided with me conceding the fact that I wasn't going to be as fast as in Hamburg. If anything, a sub 3:45 was looking less likely. However the course then presented me with another nice flat stretch alongside the city river. With the passing of each mile I was revising my gloomy 3:45 finishing time downwards; that is until mile 24.

Just before, there was a short climb from where one of the marshals shouted out that this was the last hill and that 'the worse was over'. Well, they lied! As around the corner there was, you guessed it, a long climb and this one was straight so you could see where you had to go. I wasn't too keen on this and subsequently the '3:45 at best' finish looked more realistic, if not optimistic than ever. I would read later that this mile was particularly well known for taking the edge off many elite runners' aspirations to win in record time. But at the top it did mean the final mile was a mixture of flat and downhill allowing for a strong finish, but sadly for me not quite good enough to help me get under 3:45.

After getting my medal, water, loads of bags of crisps and retrieving my kit I jumped aboard one of the free shuttle buses back to the city hall, where my hotel was nearby. Surprisingly I didn't have to queue or wait long for the said bus, so top marks to the organisers on that one.

Stats and Postscript

My finishing time was 3:45:19, so yes not far out, though my gun time was 3:45:28, which serves as the basis for my official placing of 564th of the 2584 marathon finishers (587th is my position based on personal times). I was also the 512th male and 80th in my age group. 1980 teams finished the relay marathon of which gratifyingly, only 270 finished ahead of me.

Crowd support was enthusiastic if varied with respect to numbers with most of it concentrated around the change over points for the relay race, the start and the finish at Ormeau Park. The race was won yet again by a Kenyan. Though reading the news after the event, it appears he nearly didn't make it due to not speaking any English and getting lost or something at Heathrow and almost missing his flight to Belfast!

As part of our chat on the morning of the race, Roger tells me that he's been unaffected by the recent airspace chaos having been busy doing marathons in the UK for the last few weeks and thus not needing to fly. I remembered this 'commentator's curse' as I waited for the re-opening of Belfast City airport on Tuesday at 1pm after the place was closed due to more volcanic ash spurting from Iceland. I was due to fly back on Tuesday anyway and it was a good job my flight was in the late afternoon so I was lucky to be unaffected! Interestingly, after arriving home I would hear on the news that Irish airspace was to close again on Wednesday. Surely, they hadn't opened it up just for me?



The Prince Albert Memorial Clock, yes it does lean...



The City Hall, it all started here, the race that is...