

Put a DC Cherry Blossom on Top

I achieved many athletic goals this year – Skiing and Snowboarding, MS150, Ironman Finisher, Concrete Canoe Nationals, Hor’s Categorie Climbs of Le Tour de France, and RAGBRAI, just to name a few. What better way to finish it off than by attempting to regain qualifying a time for Boston at the Marine Corps Marathon, the “People’s Marathon” in Washington, DC.

Marie had recently moved to Virginia to begin studies at George Washington University for her Masters in International Education. I was excited for the chance to visit her while on this trip. She met me at the airport and we drove to Ford’s house in Fairfax, VA to settle in. We went back into town the next day to pick up my race packet. Marie’s always been a great travel guide wherever she is, be it in Austria, Japan, Mexico, the list goes on. She took me around the National Mall to see all the DC tourist hot spots and then we spent a few hours at the Newseum. The most memorable part of that afternoon was when Marie spilled her soup on herself at lunch, and it started to pour down rain as we were leaving the Newseum to drive back out to Fairfax.

We returned to Fairfax and prepared a carbo loaded dinner upon my request for fuel on race day. Then it was early to bed and early to rise. Marie dropped me off at the Vienna Metro Station, which opened early to get runners to the start line, and I took the Orange Line to Rosslyn Station. I stepped off the metro along with a crowd of many other runners. The escalator at Rosslyn was the tallest I had ever seen! It was packed full of runners dressed in sweats and wearing gym bags. The starting area was well organized, with upbeat music playing, short waits at the port-o-lets, an efficient bag drop-off and a wide starting area. My plan was to run with the 3:10 pace group, and I found them clustered around the sign and balloons.

The spirit with which the National Anthem was sung was nothing short of what I’d have expected from the nation’s capitol, with a flag ceremony and jets flying overhead. A gun signaled the start of the marathon and a sea of bobbing heads made its way down Arlington Ave. It was a chilly morning, so I wore my UH track jacket for the first 2 miles of the race, where I handed it off to Marie and Ford. A cool mist and foggy horizon made running over the Potomac on the Key Bridge an eerie experience. I felt comfortable running with the pace group. It was still early in the race, so there was a large number of us. Around mile 6 we passed Team Hoyt and we applauded and called out encouragement for their inspiring story.

The course looped around Georgetown University rising 100 feet to the reservoir at mile 8, and then we descended the same route into Foggy Bottom. Marie and Ford were there cheering outside the stores on M Street. I think running with the pace group made it easier for them to find me. The marines were in full force along the course, keeping us inspired as we continued clipping away at the miles. The sun was beginning to burn off the fog as we ran along the picturesque shores of the Potomac River, passing the monuments and memorials in dedication of our nation’s greatest heroes.

Our pace leader ran us through the half in 1:33:36. With a little time in the bank, our chances of crossing the finish line with a Boston Qualifying time were looking good. We ran back toward the National Mall along the Washington Canal and under the cherry trees lining the Tidal Basin. It was an awesome experience running from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol and looping back. Marie and Ford found me again around the National Mall.

The marathon route took us across the I-395 and National Rt. 1 Rochambeau Memorial Bridge at mile 20. It was a long bridge and the sun was starting to heat things up. I dropped back a little from the pace group and ate the sport beans I had grabbed from an aid station at mile 19. I caught back up to the pace group around mile 22 on the downhill into Crystal City. By the 24th mile, as we passed the Pentagon, the number of runners left in the group had dwindled to about 10. We entered into the final stretch passing by Arlington Cemetery. Anne, my Ironman friend, hollered out to me from where she was standing at mile 26. It was great timing because I needed that extra jolt to make it up the steep road leading to the finish at the Iwo Jima Memorial.

I crossed the finish in 3:09:09, and received my finisher medal, proud to have qualified anew for Boston! I made my way through the finisher area and found Marie and Ford waiting for me. I was a sweaty mess but they hugged me anyway! There were tons of people and the public transit lines were packed. Anne met us a short time later and offered to drive us out to the Vienna Station where the car was parked. She did this even after having just driven back from Philadelphia that morning – quite an Ironman effort!

We picked up ice on the way back to the house so I could soak and reduce the swelling in my legs. Ford fired up the grill and we ate bratwursts from Wegman's with our cousin Russell who drove up from town to join us for the meal. It turns out that Vanessa, my friend from UH, lives just across the highway. She drove over later in the evening and we were able to visit.

Marie and I slept in Monday morning and ate a leisurely breakfast before going into town. It was a cold, gloomy day, so we visited the Smithsonian, where we could stay warm and dry indoors. We dropped into the Museum of Natural History and found my lost cousin in the primate exhibit. There was much to see, learn and do that it took the entire afternoon. We even walked up to the White House and had some hot chocolate at the Caribou Coffee across the street. The rain lifted in the early evening and we set out to have dinner with Anne at a Lebanese restaurant close to the airport. It was a tasty meal and proper farewell to send me back to Houston.