

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' THROUGH A MARATHON AND WINERIES

“Lateness” reared its ugly little head to try and spoil our plans. Anne worked late Friday night at the WineStyles store in northwest Houston, but it was worth driving through the earliest snowfall Houston has ever had. She was able to score great reservations at 5 wineries through her boss and a wine rep. Then to continue with the “late” theme, Anne and I missed our flight on Saturday morning due to the unprecedented long lines at Southwest check-in and airport security. Apparently, Southwest had to cancel 60 flights on Friday, because with the slightest bit of snow, Houston enters into a state of chaos. Fortunately, the luck of Vegas was shining upon us, and we were able to catch a flight on standby to Las Vegas connecting to Sacramento. We noticed there were a lot of runners (you can definitely spot your own kind as they stand out from the crowd) on board. It so happened that the Las Vegas Marathon was that same weekend, so we shared some of our stories and wished each other luck. By another stroke of luck, we arrived in Sacramento around the same time we were initially scheduled AND our baggage arrived the same time we did! So nya nya nyanya nya :P to “lateness”! Go Southwest, you rock!

Now that the first adventure was over, we met Sheldon at the rental car lot, and with the help of Anne’s gift to herself, a Garmin Navi (aka Doug), we got to the Expo at the Sacramento Convention Center. Afterwards, we jogged a bit around downtown Sacramento and rehearsed our finish poses at the finish line: Anne, the Heisman; Sheldon, the survivor; and I the NYC Rockette. After eating pasta with Leno, Jennifer and Francisco, we stopped by a Safeway to pick up a little something for Sunday pre-race fuel. My race day morning meal that has proven worthy to withstand the perils of a marathon has been a hardboiled egg, toast, a little ham, an orange, and a banana. I bought a couple bread rolls, 6 eggs, Gatorade, and water. The challenge now, however, was to figure a way to cook the eggs. Let me tell you that coffee makers are more versatile than you think! So if ever you are in a pinch such as this, know that setting the eggs in a coffee pot through 3 brews of hot water will cook them to perfection. The next time the waitress at IHOP asks you how you like your eggs, request coffee maker style.

Sheldon and I boarded the bus whose driver said he was headed for Disney Land because that sure sounded like more fun! Meyer and Anne would find us a bit later. The caravan of yellow school buses left promptly at 5:15am; thank goodness the heat was on so it was toasty warm. I ate my breakfast of champions on the bus, then rested my head and shut my eyes for 30 minutes. We finally got to the starting area, and I couldn’t believe we’d have to run all that way back – taxi please!

We had quite the crowd at the start of the 27th annual California International Marathon - Jennifer, Wayne, Steve, Leno, Francisco, Jeff, Meyer, Anne, and Sheldon. The organizers hold claim that it’s the fastest course in the west because there are few turns in the net downhill point-to-point course. We were going to test that today and try to run PRs. Another claim to fame is the ratio of runners to port-a-potties and true to their word, there were A LOT of them, estimated at a ratio of 26 to 1 - a number by coincidence or planned – I’ll let you decide. We had to wait all but 5 seconds, basically to check the

latch to see if it was occupied or not, which was good because apparently the cold weather decided to follow us from Houston to California. It was too cold to be shivering in line for 5-10 minutes.

We tossed our sweat bags in the truck and huddled at the starting line trying to stay warm while conserving energy until the start of the race. The race got underway, which probably gave much delight to the area residents who were trying to catch their Sunday morning zzzz's. My strategy for this course was to run conservatively the first half (1:28:30) over and down the hills (especially since coming off a hamstring injury) and to run a negative split second-half to finish under 2:55. This would earn guaranteed entry into the 2010 New York City Marathon. I found Jen and Leno shortly into the first mile and hung with them.

The rolling hills combined with a nippy cold head wind made it hard to judge my pace. I was trying different running techniques to get over and down the hills, which I don't recommend doing during a marathon in which you want to PR. I let myself loose and flew down a couple of hills, just kept steady pace on others, tried lengthening my stride and who knows what all else – there were a lot of hills on which to experiment. Going up, I shortened my stride, increased my cadence, held back a little, I even used a little momentum from the downhill to start up another hill. I guess what worked best was to shorten my stride up the hills letting my pace drop a bit and to allow myself to relax but stay controlled going down.

There were definitely some distractions along the race course. Leno and I followed close behind a runner fully clad in a ninja outfit with the works: numchucks, sword, and daggers. We feared to pass this guy until later in the marathon when he tires. Jennifer can say she's seen it all when a runner dressed in a pink ballerina tutu pranced past her. I imagine she was a bit distraught. Anne caught sight of a boy on a skateboard tethered by a rope to his dad's bike. Keep in mind that the course was hilly and there are no brakes on skateboards. In years past, runners were chased and pecked at heels by free range chickens. Our hope was to grab a couple by the legs and have them fly us along the course, but they must have been cooped up with the morning frost. Clearly we were disappointed.

1:30:58 was my time crossing under the half marathon mark – late... again. That was slower than I had intended, but I didn't want to panic. I could run a 1:24 second half; that's about a 6:25 min/mile pace. My strategy was to run 6:20s the last 10k anyway, so until then I just needed to be smart and pick off the time gradually. I was making good time. The average pace called out by the volunteers at each mile kept dropping. I caught up to the 3 hour pace group around the 19-mile mark. They were well ahead of pace, projected to finish in about 2:57 or so. I ran with them for a couple minutes to feed off their energy and to break the wind.

Reaching the 20-mile mark and with 10k to go, I knew it would be close at the finish. I continued to dig down deep. It did feel good to be passing so many runners. I've been on their side before, and I tried to offer as much encouragement as I could afford without losing focus on my mission. At 23 miles and with 2:35:07 on the clock, I could feel that my legs were tired and knew this would be a real test. I had to give it everything I had left; I told myself just a little over one loop around Memorial Park. At 26 miles and with 2:54:37 on the clock, I knew it was too late now, not even Usain Bolt could help me. I crossed the

finish line but did not look at my watch to stop my time. I just threw my cap down and sat on the curb – oh, so close again!

My official finish time was 2:55:57. I am happy with my time. It was another marathon in another state under 3 hours, but I could not help but feel disappointed and frustrated all the same because qualifying for the New York Marathon remains at an arm's reach. I can learn from this race, and it's promising to have run a 1:25 for the second half. There are still a couple more opportunities before the close of the 2010 Marathon registration period. Mickey and his friends are going down at the Walt Disney World Goofy Challenge in January. I will set my sights on a sub 1:20 PR in the half, then try and survive the marathon the next day.

Some other results from the weekend:

Anne ran a PR, 3:25:39 – that's her 3rd PR this year to go with 10-miler and 5-miler races.

Sheldon ran his very first marathon in under 4 hours – he wore those barefoot shoes.

Jen and Leno have had better races, but nothing was going to shut them down – not ninjas or ballerinas.

Jeff battled tired legs and flu symptoms to finish – big props for toughing it out.

We got back to the hotel after meeting up with our friends at a brewery house for dinner. I noticed I no longer had my wallet in my coat pocket. I figured it must have fallen out when I jumped and rolled in a pile of leaves alongside the street. I figured the state of California received enough taxes and I would rather not donate any extra to Arnold. Sheldon and I went back and rummaged through the pile. Luckily, he was able to wrestle it away before it could decay to whence it came.

With so many activities within a couple hours from Sacramento, it truly is a destination marathon. Leno, Francisco and Jen took a day trip to Tahoe. Michelle and Jeff visited the coast. Jaime saw San Francisco. Anne, Sheldon, and I toured the wine country in style with the great hook ups Anne arranged through her boss at WineStyles and a Wine representative.

The first winery we visited was Revana. The owner and founder practices medicine in Houston. Small world, or at least, New World isn't it? The Oregon Pinot Noir had a pleasant bouquet and was very crisp and refreshing as the fruit flavors were present but not too overpowering.

Our 12 o'clock at reservation was canceled because the snow-closed roads in Tahoe were holding our host hostage. So on we went to Reynolds Family Winery. It so happens that the founder and owner also practices medicine. Are you sensing a trend yet? In fact, he started making wines in the garage of his anesthetist. He loves dirt biking. Burt Reynolds is the kitty cat at the winery, guardian of all wine secrets. We had the unique experience of sampling a few Cabs straight from the barrel – will anyone believe us? Their proprietary blend is called Persistence.

We grabbed a bite to eat next door at a sandwich shop before driving over to Silenus Tasting Room, where we were given the opportunity to sample wines from various producers in the area. The Methiasson white blend and Debauchery were definitely winners. Our 4th and last visit was at The Girard Tasting Room. You'll never taste a Mixed Black as liquid gold as the one they poured us. It had a

deep aroma and texture, no oak, a bit earthy with tannins that were nicely balanced so the finish was not too dry.

We enjoyed a fabulous meal at a restaurant called Sante, located in the Fairmont Hotel Sonoma. We shared our orders of pumpkin ravioli, crusted duck, and cod. We then retired for the night at the Inn at Sonoma. In the morning we were greeted in the lobby with a fabulous breakfast spread. The roof top hot tub was also very relaxing.

We made it to another winery late that morning but had to turn around when Anne received a call from the Inn saying that they had found a wallet in the lobby sofa cushions. Yes, it was mine. I consider myself lucky on this trip, not only for recovering my wallet twice, but for not having lost my mind. We were able to enjoy a glass of sparkling wine with bread and olive oil at Gloria Ferrer, though a bit quickly because we had to drop Sheldon off at the airport. He put the pedal to the metal (well as best he could in a boat on wheels, aka 4 cylinder Dodge Magnum) on one-lane windy roads through the rolling hills of the wine country. It would be unfortunate to miss the flight and have to stay another day out there – yeah right! I had my first meal at an In-n-Out, and Anne ordered the Animal Fries. Wow, what a trip! Doug was invaluable, especially with his whimsical Garmin Slipstream cycling comments.