

Back in October 2008 I stamped my ticket to the 2009 Boston Marathon on April 20 by running a 3:09:09 at the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington D.C. It's nice not to have the pressure of qualifying breathing down your neck for 26.2 miles when I ran the 2009 Houston Marathon. So, I decided to set my sights on a P.R. I ran my personal best in the 2006 Houston Marathon, 3:02:04, and really haven't come close since. So, with the elusive 3 hour mark still staring me down, I went for it. I trained the next 2 months preparing to run 6:40 pace to finish in 2:55:00. That would give me a 5 minute comfort zone and that time would also get me into New York, not leaving my chances to the lottery.

This year was my 5th running of the Houston Marathon, 2005-2009 and each year the event gets bigger and better. This year was a record year for participants (25,000 registered to compete in the marathon, half-marathon and 5k) and had the fastest field competing in the marathon (namely Deriba Merga of Ethiopia – 4th place finisher in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games). So, I thought to myself that all the stars were aligned for me to run my personal best.

I arrived at the start line area around 6:30am and went through my pre-race routine. I squeezed my way to the front with the 3 hour pace group. I had a good view of the elites warming up before the start at 7:00am. My strategy was to hang with the 3 hour pace group for the first mile and then pick up the pace. I didn't want my adrenaline to take over and then ruin the rest of the run. Morning race temperatures were in the low 50s, not too cold or hot. There was a slight wind coming from the north and not a cloud in the sky.

My first mile split was 6:46. Most of that was uphill going out of downtown on the Elysian Viaduct. The second mile had the first water station. I grabbed a cup of Gatorade followed by some water (as I would do at all the others). I came through in 13:23, just about right where I wanted. I saw Dad at the usual spot around 4.5 miles about 32 minutes into the race. He drops me off in the morning and then goes to work and takes a break to come watch the stampede of runners. He gets to see the elite front-runners. I

only see the helicopter that is following them. The first timing mat was at the 10k. I crossed it at 41:29, perfect pacing!

I still had fresh legs under me, but after 5 marathons of running experience, I know how hard the marathon gets after 20 miles, so I kept with my strategy of running a steady pace. I ran past some of the Lamar High School cross-country runners (around the 6.5 mile mark. They were handing out water and Gatorade – thanks for volunteering! I kept chugging along, trying to draft off of some of the half marathoners to save some energy. Mom and Marie were cheering for me at the 8 mile mark. They were armed with cameras, clappers and the “IRONMAN JOE” sign that Marie made for me when I came back from Brazil. That was enough motivation for me to run through the first nine miles in 59:42. A little fast but still around the pace I needed to run.

Running down Montrose I started a conversation with Michael, a runner from England. This was his 5th marathon and first since the 2008 Boston Marathon. I told him I'd be running Boston later this year and he said it is a great race. He gave me some pointers on the hills and that helped pass the time to the 10 mile mark. We wished each other luck on this race and future races as I let him go on ahead of me because he was going a bit faster than I wanted to go. I saw Mom and Marie shortly thereafter along University Boulevard. They've gotten really good at following me in the marathon.

After running through West University I came to the half-marathon mark in 1:27:39. I couldn't ask for a better split. Now all I needed to do was repeat that for the second half and with a sprint finish at the end I'll finish in 2:55:00. Of course, that's always easier said than done. I ran with a guy that had a 3 hour pace paper tagged to the back of his jersey. I asked him what his strategy was, a little concerned that I did not have the correct time. He said he wanted to go out a little quicker and then gradually slow down the pace to finish in 2:59:30. Whew, I was still safe.

After going over the Westpark Bridge (the highest point on the course) I ran with someone wearing yellow racing flats. I ran up beside him and said, “I'ma diggin' those

yellah shoes partnah” kind of in that Texas accent. He laughed and said all he wanted to do was finish, and I agreed that crossing the finish line is the primary goal. We both had the same idea in mind, wearing our bright yellow racing flats to sacrifice a bit of comfort for some speed. I picked up the pace after the water station around mile 15.

I saw Mom and Marie again at San Felipe and Post Oak. I figured I must be keeping a good pace if they keep finding me and I still felt pretty good. I came through the 16 mile mark in 1:47:08. I lost 28 seconds off my pace but I wasn’t going to panic. There were still another 8.2 miles to go. I made the turn off San Felipe onto Tanglewood. I always like running through Tanglewood, probably because that’s the last stretch where I don’t feel pain. I made the quick turn onto Chimney Rock and then prepared myself for the long run towards downtown on Woodway.

I ran the next two mile splits at 6:33 pace and crossed the 30k timing mat at 2:04:18. I had already made up half of that time that I was behind at 16 miles. Michael whom I spoke with around mile 9 was just a few hundred feet in front of me at that point. But it took me until about mile 20 to catch up with him. He was still yelling at the spectators “louder”. He would always yell out thank you when they cheered. I guess he really liked having people out there on the course. He had great energy and was having a great time. I had run a pair of sub 6:30 miles and was now 12 seconds ahead of race pace!

I took advantage of this second wind and ran a 6:20 mile to put me 30 seconds ahead at mile 21. 5.2 miles left and I could feel it getting hotter. It had been 2:19:30 since the start of the race. For sure the male leaders have finished with the females soon to follow. With a 6:25 mile my lead had grown to 44 seconds at 21 miles. This is where I saw Mom and Marie again. They said I was looking good, and I felt good, especially when I was the one passing runners and not the one being past! I ran another quick mile at 6:33 to increase my lead to 51 seconds. Inevitably, though, I lost that second wind, which had lasted for about 10k and my pace dropped down to 6:50. Devin yelled out to me from the Waugh bridge as I passed by.

I was still ahead of my pace when I ran by Trey and Blake along Allen Parkway at Montrose. They had made a sign and everything! Later they said I looked like crap at that point of the race. I kind of felt like that having run my next mile in 7:17. That put me exactly on pace, now it was time to grit my teeth and bear the pain for the next 1.2 miles. It was now or never, being so close to a 2:55:00.

I made my way down Allen Parkway into downtown where it becomes Lamar. I took the left turn onto Milam, it was pretty deserted, just concrete and tall buildings. Then I made the final right turn onto Rusk. I could see the finish line taunting me in the distance. I glanced at my watch and knew I had to kick, but nothing fired. At this point it was survival. I ran a bit closer joining up with the half-marathon finishers and I could hear the crowd cheering. That got my legs kicking a bit more. The last final 200 meters I gave my all, which wasn't much at that point. The announcer called out my name and I pumped my fist in victory as I crossed the finish line with a new PR of 2:55:08, my first marathon under 3 hours!