

Getting Down and Derby

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Part of my training for the Kentucky Derby Festival Marathon was to learn about the sport of horse racing, so when Leno sent out a timely invitation to watch quarter horse races at the Sam Houston Horse Race Track in northwest Houston, I joined him, Francisco and David to experience the sights and sounds of the horses thundering down the track. After some explanation, I placed bets on horses I thought had a chance of winning, which made the races more exciting, even if I was not lucky to win. Overall, I came away inspired and learned quite a bit from Leno and David who are big fans of the sport.

Aside from horsing around, I added an ultra marathon to my training schedule. Two weeks prior to the marathon I camped out in Huntsville State Park with the Runners High Club to run the Hog's Hunt 50k. It was a hot and humid day when even the seasoned ultra athletes suffered on the trails, but my girlfriend, Lisa kept me motivated with her cheers and handmade signs. I held on to 2nd place, crossing the finish line in 4:33. This experience taught me more about my body's energy consumption, which I will apply to my marathons and use as a stepping block to run longer ultras.

That following week, I primed my legs with a couple of short distance races in HARRA's Tour de Bayou series and the LP Track Race. Now I was ready to get down and "derby" in the Blue Grass State. Melissa picked me up from the St. Louis airport Friday morning and we drove east on IH-64 to Louisville after fueling our systems with a tasty French toast breakfast at MiMi's. We rolled through the open pastures and farmlands of Illinois and Indiana with our phones alerting us when we crossed back and forth into Eastern and Central time zones until we officially lost an hour of the day.

Losing that hour didn't leave us enough time to eat lunch and visit the Derby Museum as we had planned, so we drove straight to the hotel and checked in. Then we stretched out our legs a bit by walking down Bardstown Avenue in search of a good lunch spot. The street was lined with a mix of stores, coffee lounges, clubs, bars and smoke shops but we found a restaurant and filled up on a roasted asparagus salad with beets, a salmon sandwich and fish tacos with coleslaw. On the way back to the car I posed for a picture behind a card board cut out of a Why Louisville Man lifting 500 pounds weights.

"Why Louisville" was a good question, as we made it into downtown for the marathon expo. The city is small compared to the Houston metropolis, but it still had plenty of traffic. The Ohio River flows westward, marking the state's border to its college basketball rival, Indiana to the north. The UI Hoosiers were ousted early in this year's Tournament and had to watch the UK Wildcats win it all. Whiskey makers advertised on billboards reminding us that we were in Bourbon country, producers of America's fine spirit. The Fleur de Liese was also a common symbol, adding to the fanfare of the town.

While picking up our packets at the expo, Melissa and I noticed that the number of mini marathon participants far outweighed the number of us running the full tour of the city. I wrote "Giddy-up from Texas" next to where we signed our names on a poster pinned to a wall. Personally I prefer to roam expos in an open layout so that I can visit areas I'm most interested in once or twice, but this expo routed us in a one-way traffic zigzag pattern, taking us by each exhibitor individually. Melissa found a good deal on a hat that she could wear during the marathon, to shield her from rain or sun.

Derby fever was taking a hold of the city, with 70 festivities lined up for two weeks leading up to the “Greatest 2 Minutes in Sports”. The horse race at Church Hill Downs has been a 137 year tradition attracting residents and visitors to enjoy concerts, parades, carnivals and other attractions during the week. In the last 37 years the city has added the marathon, a hot air balloon race and a steamboat race. Melissa and I drove a short distance from our hotel to the Exposition Center where the hot air balloons were staged. They were tied down and remained grounded allowing us to walk from one to the other. An announcer counted down for an all glow, creating a spectacular sight of 50 balloons lighting up the night sky. We left soon after the FAA ordered that the balloons be taken down because of high winds.

We prepared our racing gear before going to bed and set our alarms to allow ourselves time in the morning for our pre race routines, which included the hotel’s continental breakfast at 6am. We arrived in the starting area around 7:00am with plenty of time to settle in before it started at 7:30. The weather forecast predicted scattered thunder storms, but there was not a cloud in the sky at the start with temperatures in the high 50s reaching the low 70s later in the race.

In the shadows of Louisville Slugger Field, the starting gun sounded and a stampede of runners galloped down Main St. Within the first mile we ran past the venues on Museum Row; Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, Muhammad Ali Center, Louisville Science Center, 21c Museum Hotel, Frazier History Museum, Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Glass Works, Kentucky Show! and finally Louisville Slugger Museum with the iconic giant wooden bat at the entrance.

I settled into a pace with a couple of other marathoners and began conversing, sharing our experiences and our goals. Ryan, from Ohio works in Cleveland as a consultant and is a father of 2. He wants to run a marathon in every state. Matt, from Wisconsin is a Sophomore at the University of Indiana. This is his 3rd marathon in which he wants to PR while qualifying for Boston. His dad who has finished several Ironmans was out along the course cheering. Jonathan traveled up from Baton Rouge with a group of classmates from Louisiana State University. This is his 6th marathon and his goal is break 3 hours.

In what seemed to be no time at all, we were at the 8 mile mark, flanked on either side by the University of Louisville Stadium and Churchill Downs. We ran through a tunnel that took us under the stands and horse track, onto the central concourse. It was an amazing experience to be running where so many great races have taken place. We ran a loop on the paved inner path and exited on the far side through another tunnel. After mile 9 the marathon turned south onto Southern Pkwy, while the mini turned north. Spectators cheered for the 3rd place female, who was now just a couple hundred yards in front of us. By mile 11 we caught up to the 3rd place female and encouraged her as we passed.

Southern Pkwy. led us into Iroquois Park at mile 12, where we were immediately greeted with a long hill. On the ascent, we saw the lead runners leaving the park, passing their 15 mile mark. I didn’t want to attack the hill, so I let Matt and Jonathan run ahead. The park loop was on a gorgeous tree lined paved road, which helped take my mind off the rolling hills. Halfway through a marathon, when I’m alone with my thoughts, I look for little things to seek pleasure in. Hence I was excited when I saw volunteers handing out small water bottles instead of the paper cups. This allowed me to carry water for a little ways and consume an energy gel and an electrolyte tablet at my leisure.

My legs still felt fresh and I encouraged the 2nd place female shortly before descending the final hill. I left the park at mile 15 and quickly made up the ground I lost to Matt and Jonathan on the hills in the park. For the next mile I kept pace with a runner about 20 yards in front of me, then I let him gain a little distance on me. The course doubled back on Southern Pkwy., so at my mile 17 Melissa and I were able to wave and cheer each other on. By mile 18 the runner I had been keeping pace with was close to 100 yards in front of me. This was a helpful reference point because I was not wearing a watch nor were there clocks at the mile markers.

I almost lost sight of my reference runner in the sea of mini marathoners, where the courses merge. I ran to the right side of the road to avoid the crowd and spotted him again. As I approached the 20 mile marker sign, I yelled out ahead to ask the spectators what time it was in the day. I pointed to my wrist as if I had a watch which helped them understand my question. It was 9:46, which put me in a comfortable position to run 7 minute miles over the last 10k and finish under 3 hours. My legs still felt good though, so I decided that the race was on!

By the 21st mile I had reeled in my reference runner and continued running ahead. The marathon course branched off again from the mini on Breckenridge St. and it was empty again. I could see a few runners scattered in the half mile ahead of me, including the 1st place female. Amy was a local runner and had a friend pacing her with two cyclists wearing yellow pace shirts leading the way. We wished each other a strong finish when I caught up to her in the 22nd mile.

There were a few little rollers in the neighborhood but I didn't find them challenging and managed to pass a couple more runners. A spectator yelled out that I was in 18th place. Shortly thereafter the course turned north for a block on which I passed another runner. The spectators at the end of the block pointed me onto Main Street, where I crested the final hill. With 1.2 miles left I could faintly hear a band playing far off in the distance of the long, wide and empty road. I spotted a runner about a quarter mile ahead, so I made it my goal to catch him. He was about 30 yards ahead of me at the final turn. I bore down and crossed the finish line in 2:57:07 for 16th overall and 3rd in age group.

A volunteer congratulated me as she put a medal around my neck. I thanked her and continued through the finish area grabbing plenty of water and some bites to eat. I was in line with Julius, who just finished his cool down after placing 3rd overall in the marathon. We congratulated each other and from the little we talked I am not going to eat Chinese Buffet the night before a marathon. That cool down of his sounded like a good idea, though, so after I changed into my compression gear I jogged and did some strides, after which I felt a lot better. Then I laid out on the lawn and stretched with the sun's warmth keeping my muscles loose.

I called home to share the good news with my mom highlighting the good parts of the marathon and my plans to celebrate. Then I called Lisa and told her I missed seeing her and her signs out along the course. I sent out a few texts to my avid followers, some of whom had races this weekend as well. Our bib numbers had a tear off voucher for beer, so I got up and picked up a "red Solo cup to start the party". I returned to my spot on the lawn and managed to get my hands on another couple vouchers while talking to other runners.

Melissa stayed tough throughout the marathon and finished with a PR of 5:24:43. We met each other at her car and drove back to the hotel to clean up and rest for a little bit. Our first stop out in town was The Comfy Cafe, a coffee lounge on Bardstown that smelled really good when we walked passed it on Friday. I ordered a Real Kentucky Cheddar Cheese Scone with a Frankfurter dark roast coffee and I quieted my sweet tooth with the Double Derby Affogato, which is two shots of espresso poured over two scoops of mint julep ice cream. Melissa enjoyed a blended treat of coffee with cookies and cream. We were so wired from consuming all that sugar and caffeine that we could run another marathon!

Our next stop was The Dish, a restaurant on Main St. listed on the Urban Bourbon Trail. To start things off, I ordered a flight of Bourbon, which included a tasting of Booker's, Basil Hayden's, Knob Creek and Four Roses. I dared Melissa to try a little and judging by her reaction I needn't worry about sharing any more. I was familiar with Knob Creek, since I have a flask and bottle at home. The Booker's and Basil Hayden's were new to me and each delivered a distinct bite and tangy after taste. The Four Roses has a great history of finding success in Japan before returning to the US and I am glad they returned because their single barrel looked and tasted like gold.

We both ordered plates of real Kentucky fried chicken and fixings. It was a tasty reward after running 26.2 miles through the streets of Louisville. Every bone on my plate was picked clean down to the last finger licking crumb. An acoustic guitar player entertained us with songs from the 80s and 90s. He engaged us by clapping and repeating lyrics. During one of his breaks I ordered him and myself a glass of the Old Forester Bourbon to thank him for sharing his talent and making it a fun late afternoon.

To continue the celebration, we drove down to the marina where we could board The Spirit of Jefferson for a cruising tour of the Ohio River. I had directions to the wrong marina, however so we ended up watching the ship float away from down the shore. We spoke with a couple locals who said we weren't missing too much. They suggested we drive 6 miles down River Road to the historic Captain's Quarters. A storm was blowing in but we beat it to the restaurant. Our waitress sat us at a table by the window, giving us a much more pleasant view of the river, rather than being on a boat in the rain and wind.

Again I ordered a flight of Bourbon that I selected from their list. Judging by the scent of the 1792 Ridgemont Reserve, I could tell it was going to be a stiff drink. After a few displeasing sips I decided to throw it back. Melissa was able to capture my "not all Bourbons are created" expression, which she found amusing. I did enjoy the Heaven Hill and Eagle Rare alongside my order of humus and quinoa salad. Melissa took the safe route with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and a dinner plate of fish. We closed dinner with a bite of Derby Pie for dessert and coffee then Melissa safely navigated us back to the hotel.

There was no rush the next morning, so we slept in before checking out of the hotel. We entered the Kentucky Derby Museum and joined a guided tour of the grounds at Churchill Downs. Our guide first took us to the Winner's Circle and spoke passionately about the venue and the sport of horse racing. At the Paddock, she pointed out the spires, which are iconic to Churchill Downs and remain the only original pieces of architecture. We walked past a couple memorials of horses that won people's hearts. She then led us into the grandstands via the tunnel used by the horses. The tour ended at the horse stables where a previous race horse lives out his glory days eating and playing with his pony companion.

Back inside the museum we walked by all the exhibits. There were fashion displays of the big hats and bright colored dresses that women wear to the Derby. Various silks that the jockeys wear were also on display. A wall of winners broke down the year-by-year results with horse's name, breed and home, jockey, owner, prizes and times. Melissa crushed me at the trivia game and racing game we played. On the second floor we learned about horse breeding, horseshoe making, the training a jockey must do, distilling Bourbon, and watched footage of a few races and an informative video of Derby history. Lastly we bought a couple mementos from the gift shop.

There was one more stop I wanted to make before we drove back to St. Louis. We found a liquor store and I bought a bottle of Evan Williams and Buffalo Trace Bourbon to bring back to Houston. Now I felt the trip was complete. About halfway through Indiana, we stopped to eat home-style cooking at an Amish Restaurant Buffet. I was a bad co-pilot and ended up dozing off. Melissa dropped me off at the airport and we said our farewells.

I continued the Kentucky Derby Festivities the following weekend at my running club's Cinco de Mayo 5k run. It was my PIMsters goal race and they all did very well, earning age division awards right and left. I helped pace Debbie to a 22:28 PR and I lead out the Kids 1k. A live Mariachi Band provided extra flavor to my homemade tres leches rum cake and the Caipirinhas I was mixing from my mobile bar.

The party moved to Anvil where Lisa and I watched the Run for the Roses with a traditional Mint Julep drink. Jockey Mario Gutierrez did what no one else has done in the previous 137 years of the May Classic that is to win from post position 19. His horse, I'll Have Another, had 15/1 odds but he kept faith. On the final stretch, he closed in on the highly favored, Bodemeister and passed him to cross the wire with a thrilling come-from-behind victory. Dullahan finished for show.

We capped the night at Lisa's cousin's crawfish boil where some of her family had gathered to watch the boxing matches that evening. As it happens, Louisville is the birthplace of boxing legend, Muhammed Ali. The Kentucky Historical Society has dedicated his home site as a historical marker, a street is named after him, and there is a cultural and international education founded upon his ideals. This was my first time to watch boxing, so I felt it closed the circle on my Bluegrass State experience.