

## LITTLE ROCK, BIG MEDAL

Joseph Schwieterman

Thanks to Papa Creswell's driving skills through the Houston Rodeo and Rush Hour Traffic, Morgan and I made it to Hobby with plenty of time to spare. Regardless, our flight ended up being delayed and as we transferred in Dallas we heard our names being called over the intercom for departure to Little Rock at Gate 14. We were in such a rush that we almost boarded the plane destined for Amarillo at Gate 15 before the agent called us back. If you can recall, Morgan and I tried unlocking the wrong apartment door in Orlando during our trip for the Disney World Marathon in 2010, so acting in such an oblivious state of mind should come as no surprise.

We touched down in Little Rock behind schedule but right on time to start the party. Morgan's friend, Sara, picked us up at the airport in limousine style service and drove us to her house so we could drop off our bags and get ready for the night out. We met up with a few more of Morgan's friends at Ciao Baci, a tapas bar in the Hillcrest Heights neighborhood. We ordered plates to share and enjoyed the delicious food with a few drinks over great conversation. After making plans for Saturday we headed back to Sara's for a good night's rest.

It was a chilly but sunny morning in Little Rock when I woke up at 8:30 with Sara and her 8 year old daughter, who were already up greeting us to the brand new day. Soon the house was filled with the homey sound and smell of bacon and sausage sizzling in the pan, toast and scrambled eggs. We sat down to eat the hearty breakfast. Sara's true Southern Hospitality didn't stop there as she let Morgan drive her car for the day to get us around town.

Our first stop was the most important of the day, the marathon expo. We picked up our packets as well as David's, since he'd only be arriving that evening after work, then walked around the various vendors to see what all they had to sell. I bought a bright red blinkie so that I can run safely at night and 3 baby bibs that read "Future marathoner in training" for Daniel, Abigail and my resident niece Zoe. Morgan bought a shirt and some coasters and magnets with running slogans. We smiled for a Kodak moment by the marathon poster and balloons and as we were leaving she chatted a bit with a couple old friends. Eventually we found Sara's car, a block down from where we tried getting into a similar black car.

Next we picked up Kathryn and settled on the lunch menu at Cañon Café but not before smiling for another Kodak moment under a blossoming Bartlett Pear tree. The daffodils were in full color as well, so the natural state was displaying all its colors. After lunch I sipped on hot tea and walked around the Heights area while Kathryn and Morgan got feathers in their hair. Then we drove to Pinnacle Mountain State Park where we meet up with Courtney and Marcia to hike up to the peak. Kathryn and I ascended the East trail, while the others took the West route, but we all made it to the top around the same time. It was a gorgeous and clear day with spectacular views of Little Rock to the east and the Ouachita Mountains to the west. Lake Maumelle and the Arkansas River reflected the blue sky and sparkled in the sunlight.

I drove back with Marcia to prepare my knee for the marathon on Sunday. I hadn't been able to train, much less run since the Houston Marathon in January. Chiropractic sessions with Tricia helped loosen my IT Band and relieved the pain in my right knee, but the tendon was being stubborn and the pain continued returning. I continued foam rolling, icing and stretching and little by little it eased up to the point I could run with the support of Kinesio Tape. Two weeks prior to the Little Rock Marathon I tested my speed and endurance, placing 3<sup>rd</sup> overall at the 5k on a muddy cross country course, and finishing a half marathon with Alex in a perfectly paced run of 1:28, which earned her 4<sup>th</sup> overall female.

My knee, though, was not happy with me after that weekend, so I rested it some more. I taped it up real good, like Tricia showed me and that allowed me to put in some base miles the week of the marathon. Coupled with the hill training up Pinnacle Peak and with just 2 weeks of running, I felt confident enough to give it a go on the hilly course in Little Rock, but I needed to be careful. I took Marcia up on her offer to use the jacouzie, so I could loosen, warm up, massage and stretch real good.

Carb loading for the marathon was the next task on the prep work agenda. I knew that without having trained much for this marathon I would need all the extra glycogen storage I could consume. While I was taking care of my knee and muscles, Marcia cooked a fabulous dinner of fresh baked bread, caesar salad, lasagna and a baked pretzel strawberry dessert. Everything was delicious and I was hungry, so I helped myself to an extra helping of each.

The final task of the day was to get all of us marathoners together. David would be landing at the airport soon and we needed to pick Morgan up from Dixie Cafe where she ate a grilled catfish dinner with some more of her friends. All the socializing and catching up with old friends must have worn Morgan out because she caught some shut eye during the drive back to the house. Along the way into town, Marcia drove the 2 crucial hills of the marathon course, the ascent up Kavanaugh and the decent down Cantrell, which would peak around mile 15. They looked brutal but still manageable compared to other hilly marathons I've run like Pittsburgh. Upon returning to home, David wasted no time to fill a dinner plate and we soon retired for the night.

Race morning came much too quick, but I felt rested and prepared. I started my routine by hydrating with a glass of water and an electrolyte drink and 20 minutes of stretching. By then everyone was awake, and we sat down to eat the made-to-order breakfast Marcia prepared for us. I ate my usual couple slices of toast, hardboiled egg and fruit. After I taped my knee with fresh strips of bright yellow KT tape, we were on the road by 7am, an hour before the start which is when I took my first 2 ibuprofen. Knee supports and inflammatory medicines are not my preferred way to run, and I hope my knee returns to health soon.

Marcia dropped us off just blocks away from the start line at 7:20am, giving us plenty of time to warm up, stretch, use the bathroom, check in our bags and find our corrals. David missed the sign up to enter corral A with me, so he was back in corral C and Morgan behind him in the Open Division. Later, David commented how much energy he wasted at the start and that he would not miss a sign up again. The director of the race, Bart Yasso, was at the start line talking on the mic and gave the countdown.

Three, two, one and we were off running down Clinton Boulevard through the streets of downtown. We crossed the Arkansas River on the Broadway Bridge into Old Town Little Rock. It was a quaint neighborhood with a couple bands striking up tunes and the firemen were out cheering with a US flag hung from the ladder of a fire truck. The mile markers did not have clocks or anyone calling out the time and I wasn't wearing a watch, so as I crossed the 5k I had to judge my pace to be 7:12, based on my distance between the 3:05 and 3:10 pace groups.

There were actually timing mats set up with a clock at the 10k mark and I was slowly closing in on the 3:05 pace group as I crossed in 43:44. Shortly thereafter I saw Marcia standing on the corner of Capitol and Ferry. I called out to her as I made the turn, since she hadn't seen me. I decided at this point to shed my shirt because the sun was really heating things after a 42 degree starting temperature. I learned after the race that she tried to see me again at mile 9, though I was long gone, she did get to see David and Morgan.

I continued running a comfortable pace trying not to aggravate my knee or to exert too much energy on the hills in the first half, because I knew what hills lay ahead. After about an hour of running I pulled off to the side of a water station and swallowed another 2 ibuprofens that I had tucked into my arm warmers. By this point I was seesawing back and forth with the 3:05 pace group as the course took us up and down some little hills. Eventually, I started to distance myself, so I knew I was gaining speed and with the state capitol building on my left side, I crossed the half marathon timing mats in 1:32. At this point I assessed how I was feeling; my breathing was calm, I was well hydrated, my legs were light, no blisters but a little chaffing, and most importantly there was no discomfort in my knee! There were some challenges between now and when the race really starts at mile 20 but given how I was feeling, this time put me in a position to run a negative split and aim to break 3 hours.

Even though the walkers had been out on the course since 6am, they were in great spirits. I began passing groups of them as I ran up the hill on West Markham and then Kavanaugh. It was great to hear their whoops and hollers and I would try my best to encourage them in return but I was getting winded on the ascent. People from the neighborhood also came out to cheer, some handed out bananas and oranges while others played music from their stereos. The hill finally crested near mile 15 at a church, where a crowd of spectators screamed and rang cowbells, which in unison with the church bells ringing from above, made it both literally and figuratively the high point of the day.

With the mile 16 water station in view, I tore into my first energy gel and grabbed a water to wash it down. Some of the buildings and landmarks were becoming familiar, as I soon realized that it was the Hillcrest Heights neighborhood where we went out on Friday night and Saturday morning. Nostalgia must have had overcome me because I fumbled too long with my electrolyte capsule and missed the mile 18 water station. I didn't feel comfortable waiting for the next water station, so I popped it in and chewed, leaving a chalky and foamy feel in my mouth. I could tolerate that rather than having to succumb to the crippling affects of a cramp.

Trees lined both sides of Cantrell making it a beautiful descent as the road curved its way to the bottom. I flew down the side of the hill, which must be one of Little Rock's big rocks and had my second energy gel at the mile 19 water station. The sun was definitely in full force because I felt its burning rays immediately after emerging from the shade under the tree cover. I was now on the straight out-and-back section of the course, which was flat but open to the elements of wind and sun. Going out into Murray Park was into the wind, so it felt like I was going uphill. I crossed under the Mile 20 portal and timing mat in 2:18. I had to keep a 6:40 pace over the last 10k if I was going to break 3 hours.

We made a U-turn at mile 20.5 onto the Millennium Trail and the tailwind was a relief. I was able to see the first place runner coming back on this trail when I was going out on the road. I figured he should be done soon with a 2:30 or faster finish. I tried counting the number of runners I saw coming back on the trail to see what place I was in, and though I lost count, it seemed I was in the top 30. I washed down my last energy gel at the mile 22 water station and passed a few runners. Then I saw David on the out road. He must have also decided it was too warm to keep his shirt on. Just as I was finishing coming back, I heard a familiar voice yell out, "Go Joe go". It was Morgan making the turn to start her out-and-back. I don't think we could have timed that more perfectly if we tried.

It's a good feeling when you see a mile 24 marker, expecting to only see mile 23. That's how I felt when the course dropped us onto the River Trail leading into downtown. I grabbed my last cup of water before ascending the last hill which topped out at mile 25. With one more mile to go, I could see a few runners spread out over a ¼ mile ahead of me. They were equally as strong as me at this point, so I didn't gain any ground on them. The half marathoners were closing in on their finish on the other side of the street and I knew I'd see my finish soon as I passed the mile 26 marker. I turned into the finish chute and saw the clock ticking at 2:59 and crossed over the mats at 40 seconds. Without a watch I timed that perfectly and I was the last runner to squeak in sub-3 hours.

A volunteer put a finisher medal around my neck, after which I thought I was going to fall over because it was so huge. The city may be Little Rock, but this was a big medal that they were claiming to be the world's largest marathon finisher's medal. My official result from the chip time was 2:59:33, which earned me 3<sup>rd</sup> place in my age group. Now I'm afraid what size the age group award will be! I made my way through the finish area picking up food, drinks and my sweat bag. I changed into my compression gear then stretched on the lawn by the Michelob tent, where David and Marcia met me after he finished in 3:23:12. We grabbed a beer and headed toward the finisher chute to watch Morgan finish. She came through in 4:01:20, her fastest marathon yet, capping a great homecoming race.

Marcia drove us back home, but not before David could get his hands on a tuna sandwich from his favorite bakery, the Boulevard Bread Co. While we cleaned up and packed our bags, Marcia warmed up her stew, which was a perfect meal after the marathon and before our flight out. While waiting to board the plane at the airport, David and I each drank a celebratory beer from the local Diamond Bear Brewing Company. It was enough to knock us out for the entire flight back. Morgan even checked on us, making sure she'd not be the only one caught getting some shut eye. We arrived in Houston safely from a short but very fun trip.