

Anthony invited me to join him and his newlywed wife, Brittany, to run the Pittsburgh Marathon with Shea, Brittany's sister-in-law, who lives in Pittsburgh. I didn't have to think for too long before accepting and registering. We flew out of Houston early Friday morning and Joey, Brittany's older brother picked us up. It was time to start the pre-marathon routine. First up, carbo loading and hydrating, which was good because we were hungry coming off the flight. Joey took us to the historic Southern Slopes District where we ate and drank at Fat Heads. They had an impressive food menu and their beer selection was amazing. I ordered the Southern Slopes Sandwich served with fries of course, and I washed it down with an Erie Pale Ale and Southern Slopes Spring Bock. We left with our bellies full and our eyes drooping so we proceeded to Joey's place for a little rest. Next we headed out for a walk to stretch our legs along the riverside hike and bike trail which led us to a little shopping district. We explored REI, then ended up at the Hoffbrau House for more carbo loading and hydrating action. Joey and Anthony ordered two 2 liter pitchers each of the Dunkel and Heffeweisen. It was certainly a Kodak moment holding two full pitchers before and two full pitchers after. Brittany and I did not want to do any heavy lifting so soon before the race so we drank our Pilsner and seasonal Maibock from the half liter pitchers. Great beer must be accompanied by great food, so we enjoyed a plate of imported German soft pretzels with beer cheese. We sat outside with a view of the Allegheny River and the sound of thunder and rain as a storm rolled through. Returning to Joey's we took the opportunity to loosen our legs a bit more and do strides in an attempt to stay dry, but despite our efforts we did get a little wet. Joey then drove us to Shea's loft apartment in the Strip District. Pittsburgh's rush hour is crazy just like any other big city but Joey got us there safely. The apartment building is called the Cork Factory and is a converted historic 1900s warehouse along the Allegheny River, which back in the day manufactured and distributed corks. It's located close to a market, trails, restaurants, bars and stores, where, if you walk around, you never know what you'll discover, like a knife on the sidewalk – relax it was only a butter knife! Her dog, Miles, was excited to have visitors, which meant new smells and more playmates. We kicked up our feet for a couple hours and then decided to walk down the road to check out the colorful tents where the Cirque du Soleil was performing their Totem show. Having arrived 15 minutes late, Anthony got us a great deal at the ticketing booth buying first row tickets, generally priced at \$250 for only \$68. The performance was fun and extraordinary, especially to view it up close and personal. The acts and tricks captured the evolution of man just like the stories told on the levels of a totem pole. To cap off the night we walked into a jazz bar for more hydration and carbo loading. We slept long and hard that night because it's sometimes hard to sleep well the night before the race.

Saturday morning began with a leisurely breakfast prepared by Shea. Once we were fueled and energized we took the short jog to the Heinz Convention Center to pick up our race packets and tour the expo. Anthony and I stuck around longer than the girls because they were hosting a jewelry show that afternoon. We got to meet Dick Beardsley and share each other's running adventures. It was a delight speaking to such a great runner and we were proud to hear that he now lives in Austin, TX. I can introduce him to Morgan in November where he'll also be at the Charlotte Thunder Road Marathon. Anthony and I left the expo, happy to get all the free handouts – the race packet even included socks!

We made it back to the apartment, which Brittany and Shea had transformed into a gallery of jewelry. I couldn't be outdone so I put on my own act and did my stretches while the guests arrived.

Anthony and I escaped the jewelry show and explored the market along Penn Avenue. We grabbed a quick seafood lunch and continued walking down the sidewalks lined with vendor tents and tables selling flowers, clothes, souvenirs, and food. Each block had more and more sights, smells and sounds that stimulated our senses. All the shops were open too. We oohed and awwed at the accessories for sale in the wine store, we got high off spices at Penzy's and were overwhelmed by the cheese, meat and olive selection at The Macaroni Company. There was so much to explore along The Strip, but our energy was waning and we wanted to conserve our legs for the marathon on Sunday, so we headed back to Shea's.

After a short afternoon snooze, I took Miles for a walk to a nearby dog park hoping to find some playmates, but no other doggies were there so we continued on along the banks of the Allegheny following a path converted from an abandoned railroad track. Miles was having a good old time sniffing out all the new smells. The path took us under a bridge with stairs leading down to the river. We heeded the warning signs and did not make contact with the contaminated water which receives runoff and sewage. I was getting hungry again, so I snapped a couple photos and we headed back.

Andrew, a buddy of mine from Lamar days, met us at the Church Brew House. The historic Northern Italian Architectural style church makes quite a venue for a restaurant and beer hall as you gaze around at the original stained glass windows, organ and pews. Andrew and I ordered a burger and perogies from the kitchen so our food came out before Anthony, Brittany and Shea got their pizzas from the brick oven. The beer was sinful and the food to die for, but overall it was a heavenly experience.

Back at Shea's, we relaxed for a while then started to prep for the race. We stretched, pinned our bibs, packed our dry clothes bags, double checked and got to bed early. Race morning was casual as we ate a

quick breakfast and walked the mile or so to the start. Unfortunately the bag drop off was on the other side of the start, so we had to walk a bit more, but we made it nonetheless. A light drizzle was coming down, so it was best to be aware of slick road surfaces and puddles. The gun went off and the masses flooded the streets of Pittsburgh for the 4th annual return of the marathon.

I quickly lost sight of the lead pack and learned after the race that the rabbit ended up winning it all. My race however was a bit more composed. The course is flat by Pittsburgh standards, and after driving around seeing parts of the city I would agree with that, because the city has some major inclines, but by Houston standards the course was very hilly, which would challenge me in the later miles. Before that point, though, I wanted to focus on finishing under 3 hours and making an effort to be within range of setting a PR.

I may have been a bit too conservative to start because my first 10k was slow, coming through in 42:14. A couple miles later I pulled aside for a pit stop. That put me another minute off pace, but I wasn't too worried, there was still a lot of ground to cover. Despite the damp conditions, crowds and bands livened up the streets most all through the race to cheer us on. This was a huge help because I didn't feel too lost in this new city and it helped me get back on pace. I ran through the half at 1:29:30 with Laura and Kelly, a couple local female runners. We made up the unofficial 3 hour pace group, confident to repeat that performance.

I had been holding around a 6:30 pace, which didn't feel easy but still comfortable, so I decided to continue at that pace through mile 20. I was a little disappointed as I ran through in 2:15:26, not because of my time but in the lack of spectators. I'm lucky I didn't need help breaking through the wall. This is where the race begins with 10k left in the marathon. I had to beat 40 minutes to run a PR and a sub 3 was pretty much in the bag.

I dropped my pace a bit to catch my breath and held steady for the next couple of miles. That may have been a mistake because I felt no momentum coming up to mile 22 and my pace continued to drop. Laura passed me looking strong, but my legs began tire from all the hills. The real test came at the end of mile 23 which greeted me with a 1/3 mile descent of 150 feet. I had to stop for a minute to stretch at the bottom of the hill because my legs were cramping. Kelly passed me with a word of encouragement so I composed myself and got back to running. The last couple miles were a struggle, but I kept Kelly in sight. Sometimes I felt my leg give out and I'd stumble trying to keep myself from landing head first onto the tarmac.

I ran through downtown and approached the final turn to find yet another bridge, which meant another ascent and descent. We merged with the half marathoners and the crowd was cheering. I glanced at my watch, 2:56:15 with ½ mile to go. It won't be a pretty finish but I can do this... chip time, 2:59:44. Check off Pennsylvania, farewell Pittsburgh!

I received my medal and continued through the finish line stands picking up food and drink to consume later after I cooled down. It became clear to me that my bib number 266 had meaning because a fellow marathon finisher told me the profile measures the course to be 26.6 miles. A volunteer chased me down to hand me my bag, for which I was grateful to change into warm and dry clothes. Shea, who finished her first every half in 2:16:12 found me near and we kept each other company while we waited for Brittany and Anthony to finish. Brittany finished her first half in 3:16:54 and Anthony finished in 4:47:11.

We trekked back to Shea's where we soaked in the hot tub, washed up and rested before going out to a Hibachi Restaurant, who wouldn't want a flambé presentation after a marathon? Andrew didn't so he joined us also. After we ate and drank our fill, we piled into Andrew's VW and on our way back to Shea's picked up a couple growlers from The Church Brew House and some ice cream. It was a fun night hanging out, playing games and being mischievous. Andrew and I eventually found ourselves hanging onto a deck trying to pull ourselves out of the Allegheny after jumping in for a swim. The water was chilly and the current was fast. So I did end up setting a personal record today, it was in the 50 yard swim. Thankfully Anthony came down to be of witness the plunge because he ended up rescuing us. We warmed up in the hot tub then returned inside. After a quick bite and dessert we all retired to bed.

We were all tired and slept in Monday morning. Shea prepared a scrumptious breakfast of biscuits, sausages and cinnamon roll, with orange juice and coffee. She played hooky with us to spend more time with her guests and give a tour of Pittsburgh. After we packed our bags and loaded her car she drove us to the historic Duquesne Incline, for the best view of the city. It was a short trip up the tracks in the rickety old car which still used the original wooded cranks and gears. We exchanged cameras with another group at the top and took each other's pictures with the magnificent view.

Next we visited Rivers Casino to eat lunch and try our luck on winnings. The buffet had a wide selection of good food. I picked up a turkey leg, which inspired an elderly lady to bite into one as well. We took a picture together of our turkey legs. Anthony and I walked around the floor as he explained the different gambling tables and slots. I did not get the concept of winning because it did not take me long to lose

my bets in blackjack and craps. Anthony played with a bit more strategy and some luck on his side made him a winner. It was now time to head over to the airport and fly back home.