

Twice Uncle, Twin Cities

Marie and Ford are in their first of two years living in Tel Aviv, Israel and on September 24th they welcomed Abigail Christina Robertson, my first niece, into this world. Lisa and Raul recently settled into a house in Naucalpan, Mexico D.F. but have arranged to birth Daniel Mathias Ramirez, my first nephew, in Houston, TX. How appropriate then, is it for a proud, twice-made, new uncle to race a marathon in the Twin Cities? Luckily the schedule fell into place, such that I could run the marathon on October 2nd and return to Houston in time to celebrate Daniel's birth on October 5th.

My bags were packed and I was ready for my trip, so Thursday evening I paid a visit to Alex and Doug to meet their first newborn, Zoë Amélie Paddon-Jones. She stayed alert through most of the evening and took the main stage. Her grandparents, who had just flown in from Australia a couple days ago, added to the dinner festivities and I quickly realized where Doug gets his wit. Zoë is a warm new addition to this wonderful family with very proud and happy parents.

I jetted off early Friday morning to arrive in Minneapolis at 11am. Anne arrived the day before from Portland and rented a car, so I accepted her offer to pick me up and drop my bags at my hotel in downtown Minneapolis. We met up with the rest of the Houston crew (Jen, Anna and Monica) for lunch at A Taste of Scandinavia near Monica's parents' house where the girls were staying. The food was delicious and the Omega 3 from the salmon would be great fuel for our marathon. Afterwards we rested and later joined up with Erinn and a few of her Minnesota friends at Broders Pasta Bar, where everything is made from scratch. I got my protein and carbo fix with a wild boar risotto.

I slept in and had a leisurely morning before jogging the final 6 miles of the course. I knew the hills would test my strength this late in the marathon so I stepped inside St. Anthony's Cathedral and prayed for my friends and family and for all the runners and volunteers on Sunday. The interior was just as incredible as the outside with stained glass windows, paintings, and statues filling up the space from the wooden floor and pews to the high reaching ceiling. I concluded my tour by walking through a hallway for The Saints of the Nations.

The finish line was located near the steps of the capitol building in St. Paul, so I took a gander at the inside. Unlike the Cathedral, there was nothing too spectacular, but outside was a great tribute and memorial for the Minnesota Veterans of the Vietnam War. A history of events was written on monuments taking account of Minnesotans' involvement in the war on the home front and on the front lines. They encircled a granite laid map of Minnesota with its counties. The rose garden bordering the memorial added to the serenity of the place.

I joined up with Anne and the Houston crew again at the expo to pick up our packets and hunt down any deals from the vendors' booths, and sure enough, SmartWool socks were on a buy 2 at 20% off get one free sale. Chobani had a stand, so I grabbed a pomegranate and mango yogurt. They were also handing out "Chobani Taster" baby bibs, which will be great for Zoë, Abigail and Daniel. Whole Foods had a line of ravaged runners waiting to try their organic snacks too. Anne and I got in a picture with local elite runners Antonio Vega and Jennifer Houck. They signed my race number, which I will send to Abigail.

I took to the skyway, which, similar to the tunnel system in Houston, shelters walkers from the elements, except in Minnesota that would be freezing rain and bitter cold wind in the winter. Many shops and restaurants lined the route, but being a Saturday they were all closed. I was hungry, though and went down to street level to find a hole-in-the-wall eatery, Golden's Deli and Market. They offered an extensive menu with breakfast served all day. I ordered "The Rachel", a spicy mustard turkey and Swiss sandwich on marble rye, and then lounged on the couch.

I eventually made it to the St. Paul Saturday Morning Farmers Market, where I found vendors selling all kinds of tasty and fresh foods, decorations, clothes, etc. 'Tis the season for melons and gourds, and they were a plenty. The weird colored and shaped ones really stood out and caught my eye. There were also some that were hollowed out and used as vases for festive flower arrangements. I came across a table selling raspberries. I could not resist, so I bought a small container. I stopped to look at baby and kids clothes and saw a plaid dress, which would be perfect on which to pin my race number to for Abigail.

I continued to explore downtown St. Paul. I stumbled upon statues of the characters in Charles Schultz's Peanuts caricatures – Charlie Brown and Snoopy, Peppermint Patty and Marcie, Lucy and Schroeder, etc. I was excited to see this, because I'm a fan. On my bookshelf at home, I have a collection of Snoopies dressed in traditional international garb and headwear and I enjoy reading the comics and watching the shows. I consulted my smart phone and learned that Charles Schultz was born in Minneapolis and grew up in St. Paul. In Seventh Place Square I saw statues of Sally and Charlie Brown with guilty expressions on their sticky faces outside the Candyland shop. I stepped inside and bought a pound of dark chocolate covered treats, to share with family when I got home.

Around the corner was the Fitzgerald Theater, home of Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion. I waited in line, hoping to get tickets to the 5pm live broadcast. Throughout my trip, I've found Minnesotans to be extremely nice and helpful, and that was further proven by a lady giving me her single extra ticket for no cost. I took my seat in the theater and Garrison Keillor had a special treat for "the 24,000 skinny people" (his words) who'd be running the Twin Cities Marathon and 10 miler Sunday morning. He introduced Cantus onto the stage, a men's tenor choir from the Metropolitan Opera. Their opening song wished all the runners good luck and they performed other spectacular pieces throughout the show from Schubert to one specially made for the show. The theater is intimate, which made it a great experience to observe how the radio show is recorded, between making all the noises in the story telling and the songs. After the show, I visited the souvenir booth to buy a Lake Wobegon reusable tote for my mom, two copies of a Tales of Motherhood CD for my sisters and a bobble head of Private Eye Guy Noir for the dashboard of my Subi.

I took the 94 bus back to my hotel in Minneapolis and settled back into my room, where I called room service and ordered a French onion soup, braised pork tenderloin with baby carrots and au gratin potatoes. I packed my bags so I could leave them at the front desk in the morning in case I would not return in time to the hotel before check out. I organized my race gear for the morning and after reviewing some race day logistics, I headed early to sleep.

Anne and the Houston crew drove to St. Paul to take the bus into Minneapolis on race morning. The start area was very well organized and everything went smoothly. We found each other near the sweat bag drop off then proceeded to our start in Coral 1. Weather conditions were great on this fresh clear and sunny morning in the low 50s at the 8am start. The gun sounded and over 8,000 skinny people were off on a 26.2 mile journey from Minneapolis to St. Paul. I held back with the 3:10 pace group for the first 5k, so as not to sprint out ahead. I felt comfortable and loose as we came through in 22:05.

By 10k I had distanced myself and settled into a rhythm to come through in 43:21. Leading up to mile 10, I was running with Matt, an undergrad at a college in Wisconsin, running his 2nd marathon. We crossed in 1:09:15, about a minute faster than what I had intended, but still a good pace. Matt soon slowed his pace and I found myself with a team of runners wearing shirts that read “The Molar Millers – dentistry for the entire family”. We crossed the half marathon in 1:30:13 as the unofficial 3 hour pace group. They weren’t that organized, and by mile 15 I had to extract myself ahead of the group like a wisdom tooth. I ran through 30k in 2:07:50 still feeling good.

The Twin Cities Marathon tops the list as being one of the most scenic urban marathons. I tried my best to take it all in as I ran the tree lined streets winding through beautiful neighborhoods with locals coming out to cheer us on. We ran by pristine parks and lakes and marveled at the beautiful architecture of schools and churches. I was taking all this in for 2:16:38, which is when I crossed mile 20, right on pace for a sub 3 hour finish. I familiarized myself with this last part of the course on Saturday, and knew I had to focus my attention on maintaining 6:52 minute miles up and down the hills and try to break 3 hours with the aid of a monster downhill finish.

After finishing her 10 miler, Erinn caught sight of me near mile 25 and ran alongside me for a ways to cheer me on and encourage my 3 hour effort. I was in a daze and didn’t react, but she gave my legs a much needed jolt at that point of the race. I could see St. Anthony’s Cathedral through the trees as I approached the crest of the final hill. The finish was just shy of a quarter of a mile at the bottom of the hill. My time was 2:59:12 and it would take more than my legs to get me down there that fast. I looked around to see if I could snag some wheels – a bike, roller blades, or skate board but no such luck. I let myself fly down, as much as my legs could handle this late in the race. A solid effort got me across the line in 3:00:36, an equal split 3 hour finish.

I took my time through the finish shoot, grabbing fruit, chips, bread, warm broth, chocolate milk and water. I picked up my sweat bags then received a massage. There was a changing tent where I stretched and waited to meet up with Anne, Jen and Anna. We joined the 10 milers at Eagle Street Bar and Grill to replenish and reenact our race experiences.

10 milers

Kristen – 55:39
Erinn – 1:07:53
Jen – 1:16:48

Marathoners

Anna – 3:22:34
Anne – 3:26:52
Jen – 3:44:24