

Paavo Nurmi Marathon . Turku, Finland. 27th July 2009.

Arriving late in the evening under a clear blue sky I was met by my son Matt at the airport. I was very impressed by the courtesy of the man at passport control and by the calmness prevailing. The bus to the city terminus took forty minutes to the main railway station and after the short walk we were welcomed at our hotel by a very pleasant young man at reception. Our room was on the seventh floor with a view over the rooftops of the city and of life in the square below. It was nearly midnight with a temperature showing 20C and still busy outside as we made our way to the restaurant where we fed ravenously on steak and chips. The luxurious Scandinavian duvets were conducive to deep sleep so it was a hurry to breakfast, almost everything to eat that either a runner or gourmet could desire. We just made the train which left at 10am for the two hour journey to Turku through green farm land and forests. The concession fare of 15 euros seemed very reasonable for riding in such luxury with speeds of 125 k showing on the on-board computer screen above.

It was really hot when we walked to the hotel, with a slight breeze coming in off the sea. Turku is a resort town on the west coast of Finland and the International Marathon was a feature of the week of Festivals which included athletics at the beautiful Paavo Nurmi Sports Stadium. A street market was taking place in a square below the town's Art Museum sitting on a hill as we passed.

We encamped to the Cumulus Hotel and after a few false starts we checked in at the Marathon Headquarters beside the River Aura for our race numbers (Matt was doing the 10,000m). The shade beneath the linden tree lined avenues along the river banks looked inviting so we settled for a nearby beer-garden before making for a recommended restaurant to take our evening meal. It proved a good choice with a wonderful welcome and service from the friendly long legged blonds which seemed to proliferate everywhere in the town. I opted for pizza which was so large I was unable to finish it. It was an early night. In bed by 9pm and sleep most of the time till 9 am in the morning when we had to get up as there would not have been sufficient eating time, long enough before the races (3 events 10,000m half marathon and marathon). I managed a two mile stretch to loosen up while Matt had another half hour in bed.

Breakfast was again the wonderful Scandinavian offering. Looking at the families eating, it was clear to see this was a favourite holiday resort, with all kinds of water and land activities as well as both the art and medieval festival.

As pre race preparation after a long rest between three cold showers we made the 10 minute walk to the start at about 12.30. Already crowds were milling around enjoying pre race music and entertainment with the thermometer hovering about the 30c mark under the cloudless blue sky. Fortunately humidity was low with the promise of a breeze from the sea later (which hindered rather than helped as it was quite strong without being cool). Some runners transferred from the marathon to the half when they saw how hot it was going to be. A large field in the 10,000m left at 1pm and about 2,000 half and marathon runners at 1.20pm.

It was a relatively fast start up the river for 300 m then over a bridge and one block further before turning down stream first through town buildings then factories as we approached the 5k mark and open space before coming to the forested Island of Ruessalo. The undulating road took us on to the 10k point checking the time I was spot on 65minutes. The course then turned on to a footpath through the trees by the river in roughly the opposite direction (the pack did not sort out till the end of the half

marathon as the full distance repeated the same loop again) The course was crowded with fairly slow half marathon runners at the turn.

As the runners started to thin out on the second 10k, about 1k further on it was easy to see some of the more ancient Flying Finns competing enthusiastically with each other and anyone else within range. From about 12 k not yet affected by the heat I was feeling good and as if I would do under five hours. At this point some passing and re-passing was becoming annoying and I found myself 'sparing' with an ancient Finn in a woolly hat who was grimacing wildly as he overtook me before slowing down and repeating the same process when I had passed him. Then we came on another two doing the same thing. At this point a girl in a pink top, of about thirty maybe, loomed up in front of us. She had been right beside me at the start and for the next 20 k was always somewhere about. There was also a group of half marathoners struggling. 'Woolly hat' (who I think I identified later as Ville Lindfors) latched on to the girl in pink and chatted to her until she took off again. At this point two other marathon runners in the older groups were also trying to compete with each other and the same was happening with some younger marathon men about now. It still felt good at 15 k but coming out of the trees across a field the heat was sizzling and another few meters on, a hot head-wind hit us. This seemed to slow down everyone, many were stopping and some dropped out. For the next 2k the going was bad. Although earlier the regular drinks stations were spoiling my rhythm (but one could not afford to miss one, I drank at every one except the first and last) now it was a blessing, to stop and drink fully. My time schedule went with the wind as these two k must have taken half an hour. It was bad at 16/17 k going over tramlines and through the factory complex with no cover, but after the next drinks station I was able to pick up and pass a few as I approached the town buildings and started getting some shade from the Linden trees. It felt really nice again along the river side with the crowds giving a lot of encouragement. One of the 10,000 m finishers was running towards us along the course to see where the marathon leaders on their final lap had got to. (the winner finished after I had started my second lap, my split being 2hr 30m 16sec; the winner was 2hr 47m 59).

I kept a smooth easy pace along the river bank and over the bridge at the end of the first loop, back to the turn and past the finish, which was crowded with the half marathon runners. Turning on to the bridge at the start of the second loop the marathon runners were thin on the ground, the group were small (having got rid of the half people) and it felt quite good. Again going through the built up part I spotted the five competing older runners and the girl in pink just in front and caught up with them gradually. I got alongside 'Woolly hat' again. We were now going much slower as there seemed no air. The girl in pink, myself and 'Woolly hat' ran alongside each other for the best part of the next 2k. He was chatting in broken English and kept giving celebratory hand shakes. He said he was 72, had done 210 marathons and ran in the 1958 Olympics. Soon after this when all three of us were struggling and losing time two runners, an old Swede and a Finn passed us mockingly, shouting and waving. Just coming out of the hottest part where we crossed tramlines we had hit three hours. I started to move a bit faster and found everything felt good as we reached the next drink stop. I left the girl in pink and 'Woolly hat' there and soon after passed both the Swede and the Finn that had passed us earlier. I hit a good steady pace and seemed to sail along the third 10 k but soon after the turn into the fourth hour, the energy went. The legs were ok and the feeling was ok just short of energy. I have felt this before but not as badly as this. I think it was more the effect of the heat. Gradually the pace came back after each drink. There was now a nice breeze, and

coming out next to the river the energy came back as I passed the other group of super-vets still stopping and starting competing with each other (I think 3 of them dropped out before the end). Hitting the riverside with 4k to go Matt met me with some encouragement. He had had a good run and took some pictures, I told him I was ok and to keep out of the way. Knowing the end was coming I managed to step up the pace (the last 3k Matt said I did in 15 minutes). It was enjoyable running along the river towards the end and I felt I could have gone on further. I had to push people in the crowd and slow runners on their last legs out of the way to get past at this point.. You know what you feel like if someone comes in the way at the end of a race, annoyed! The crowd was still lining the river bank up to the bridge and making a lot of noise. I could only see people about 25 m behind at equal intervals as I turned but kept on as hard as I could in case anyone passed me towards the end. Over the bridge again I nearly made a wrong turn as the inattentive (and no wonder after being there all that time) marshal was asleep and cruised along the river bank to the turn and the home straight, making sure I stamped hard on the mats at the finish. From the finish photo there was someone just making it behind me. Strangely I felt I could have gone on more. To me it is awhile since I ran loops but it seemed to make the run easier. I did not feel the same elated almost tearful feeling at the end as in the London, but one of enormous satisfaction at doing something I had wanted to do for years and years.

A note about Paavo Nurmi (the Flying Finn).

If one clicks into the name Paavo Nurmi on the web, countless sites giving information on him appear, some contradictory but all interesting. The basic facts about him are:

He was Finnish born in Turku in 1897 and died in 1973 a much loved national hero. For many years his name went around and around in my head. Probably the first athletic I heard about on the radio and in the sports pages during the late 1930's /1940's , known as the Flying Finn one of a great group of Finnish athletics who dominated athletics between 1910 and the 1940's, he made his mark on distance running between 1920 and 1932 (the year when he was banned from amateur sport and the Olympics for accepting expenses in the USA and Germany) he set 25 world records and won 12 Olympic gold medals, in the Olympics of 1920 at Antwerp, Holland; Paris 1924 and Amsterdam 1928, over the distances 1,500m, 5,000m, 10,000m, 20,000m and cross country. The Paavo Nurmi Marathon medal commemorates his great run in Viipuri, Finland in 1924. When he retired from running he went into business in Turku and gave money to help sport and other good causes.