

## The Two Oceans Marathon – Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2010 – My Race

It is billed as the most beautiful marathon in the world; however the word marathon in the title is a little misleading since it's actually almost 35 miles in length. But the rest was true. The scenery was absolutely breathtaking. Cape Town was certainly a magnificent venue to hold such a race.

So as I set my alarm for 3.15am the night before doubts started to set in. Will my alarm go off, will the transport to the start be there waiting for me. But perhaps more importantly had I done enough training. Indeed I had only ran as far as the full marathon distance leading up to the race so the other 9 miles I needed to run after were going to be a trip into the unknown. I suppose only time will tell I thought.

The night's sleep was a little restless to say the least. But as next morning came I looked out the window. It was dark and I wondered what the weather would be like for the race. Not too hot and no wind would be perfect. As it turned out that exactly what we got.

As we made our way to the start in the van, which was about 15 minutes away, you could see more and more runners walking along the side of the road with their numbers securely pinned to their vests. Green ones, blue ones and red ones. Red numbers indicated international entrants, green denoted African runners but the blue ones showed you had completed the race at least 10 times – nutters!!

And then I just had to wait for the time to tick by. At 6am the half marathon was set on its way. They had more runners taking part, probably around 15000 or so. For the ultra I think around 8000 were entered. But how many would finish within the 7 hour time limit? And then the pens started to fill up. I was seeded in zone C, quite near the start, but as it happened I bumped into Ewen from Bourton who was in zone B so promptly ducted under the tape and started there instead. He passed on some final tips of advice, most of which I had forgotten moments after he had said it but one piece of advice did stick. He said when you get onto Chapman's Peak, which was the famous mountain pass we running along, since there were over 100 corners to negotiate, try and take the straightest line possible and therefore save a few metres. That sounded like good advice. No need to run further than you had too considering 35 miles was in front us.

As the start time approached we were squeezed in like sardines and they played the African National Anthem which was sung with great passion. I have to say it gave me goose bumps listening to all the runners singing it. I shall now always associate that anthem with my memories of the race.



And then we were off into the darkness with 35 miles ahead of us to negotiate. As we ran down the road there were loads and loads of supporters cheering us on, even at that time of the morning. Indeed that continued throughout the race which was absolutely superb and certainly gave you a lift. And with your number having your name on it, people shouted your name as you passed. Superb. The hardest part about the start was making sure you didn't go off too quick. With it being dark, reading your watch was pretty much impossible. So I relied upon my body regulating the speed and erred on the side of caution so probably slower than I needed to be. But since I had every intention of enjoying the race as much as what time I achieved I wasn't overly concerned.

As day broke, the true majesty of the scenery came into view. Wonderful cloud covered mountains with runners as far as the eye could see. This was certainly what I came for.

Even though I had been training running 1 mile then walking 1 minute, I knew this was unlikely to be feasible for the first 6 or 7k due to the amount of runners, so decided instead to run 5 miles then take a gel I was carrying, have a little walking break whilst I was doing this and then continue on. That strategy seemed to work an absolute treat since it split the race into 5 miles chunks. I knew every 5 miles I would be stopping for a couple of minutes or so, so the distance didn't feel as daunting. Plus of course I had my camera as well and intended to take pictures and perhaps some videos on route as well!! The feed stations though were incredible, every 2k or so. We had (although not at all of them) water, powerade, coke, chocolate, potatoes and my favourite an ice lolly. The water sachets were superb. Unlike this country where you get a bottle of water, take a swig and then throw the majority away, we had little sachets that were sealed. You then broke them open with your teeth and either drank it or poured it over you with no waste whatsoever. An excellent idea and one races in this country would be wise to use in the future.

So the first 10k or so had passed reasonably well and I felt strong. I was eagerly anticipating hitting the Indian Ocean. I could see the mountain in front getting closer and knew were heading round this and the sea would be the other side. And there it was. The Indian Ocean with the waves crashing up against the shore. Absolutely stunning. Distance wise it was about 15k at this point. The next 5k would be run directly along the shoreline and through the town of Fishoek. Again support was superb. It was if everyone had come out to support the event. Music was blaring, bands were playing and the atmosphere was amazing. I think at this stage I also saw the first of the pacing groups. The board said 6 hours which was a bit of a shock since I thought I was going quicker than that!! Time to put in a few serious miles so off I trotted. For the next 10k or so the road meandered its way through the countryside to meet the Atlantic on the other side. So far no serious hills to speak of and most of the people I has spoke to had said the first half was significantly easier than the second.



And then the most picturesque mountain drive in the world came into view. Chapman's Peak. About 8km's of road with the mountain on one side and the Atlantic on the other. Breathtaking was the word. And then the hills began. The first half of Chapman's was all uphill with the road meandering first left and then right. I did my best to straight line the corners but the camber was so bad sometimes it was easier to run on the flat bits and take a slightly longer route. I devoured the ice lolly I had been given, probably the nicest one I have ever had and most probably the strangest thing I will ever eat in a race. Then thankfully the downhill section began and I could feel myself getting carried away so again slowed myself down. I hadn't yet completed the marathon distance and knew the hardest bit was still to come. The weather was also kind to us at this stage with a slight drizzle appearing in the air which was most welcome.



I passed through the marathon distance and still felt strong. Now I was entering into the unknown both physically and mentally. And then the big hill started. Constantia Nek it is called and it is certainly one of the steepest hills I have ever encountered at a race. I think I ran the first couple of km's but then when I got to a feed station decided my energy would be better spent walking with purpose rather than trying to run all the way up and then dying as I got over top. Indeed I still had nearly 7 miles to go at this stage. And all around me the majority of runners were also walking. I didn't know how far it was to the top but on inspection of my watch later I reckon I walked for over a mile, so a bit of a brute. But as the top came into view we had countdowns on boards. First 400m then 200m and then the top. Huge green balloon banners crossed the road and in front were hundreds of people lining the route. Another magical experience.

And then that was about it. I had 5 miles to go to the finish and most of it was downhill. Again the camber on the roads hurt, particularly as I had been on the go for nearly 5 hours at this stage. But as the km boards started to count up to 56 you could feel the atmosphere building again. More people lined the route together with runners who had finished who were walking back to cheer you on. The finish wasn't far. One final hill was negotiated, which again I think I walked, since I decided I wanted to run over the finish line looking fairly strong. And it was only then that I knew I was going to do it. 6 months of planning, preparation and training was nearly going to be over. I was actually going to complete an ultra marathon. And I have to admit I did feel myself getting quite emotional. Thinking back to all the people who had supported me and were thinking of me at home. If I wasn't wearing my contacts I think I may even have cried.

And then the University Of Cape Town came into view and onto what they call the field of dreams. The way to the finish was lined with people 4 and 5 deep on both sides. You felt like a real champion running through it. And then as I neared the finish line the announcer picked out my name on the tannoy. Amazing. I gave it some large arms in the air which got another huge cheer and then that was it. The line was crossed and I was now officially an ultra runner. My bronze medal was handed to me and then I looked at my time. 5.23.31.



Overall it was an amazing experience and something I would recommend to anyone nutty enough to want run 35 miles. The people were amazing and Cape Town is a stunning city.

But that wasn't the end of the race. As the cut off of 7 hours approached you knew some people wouldn't make it. As I stood on the barrier cheering the final runners in the countdown began. From where I was standing it was about 200m from the finish line. And as the announcer started to countdown the last 10 seconds it was heart breaking to see runners desperately trying to move their aching bodies slightly faster to cross the line in time. Many failed. They had run all that way to get no recognition in the results and no medal to wear with pride around their neck. I guess it just added to the drama of the day.

So what's next for me? Well all I can say is the Highworth 5 has got a tough task to follow!! And what about adding this as a club championship race next year? They do a half option as well you know!!