



From Staten Island to Central Park

The 2008 New York City Marathon from my perspective

By Maurice Brown

It's six o'clock am and I'm sitting under a tree behind a building at Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island. Fort Wadsworth is a military base located by the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Today it is also the 'Runners Village.' It's where everyone participating in the marathon awaits the start.

Due the fact that there are multiple street closings on race day, runners need to take one of the official transportation buses to ensure arrival at the start on time. With just under 40,000 runners to transport, buses leave from downtown Manhattan and New Jersey as early as 5 o'clock am. This is why I'm at Fort Wadsworth hours before the 9:40 am start.

I'm sitting under a tree behind a building to relax, conserve energy, and get some shelter from the wind. The temperature is supposed to reach the low 50's, however right now it's cold and windy. I don't know the exact temperature but it's somewhere in the low 30's. With the wind chill it's got to be even colder. Even with multiple layers on, it doesn't take long for me to get cold. I decide to get up, walk around, and get a hot beverage to help me stay loose and warm.

As I walk around, I see people from numerous countries. The New York City (NYC) marathon attracts runners from all over the world. It is also, along with Boston, Chicago, Berlin, and London, part of the World Marathon Majors Tour. The World Marathon Majors is a series of marathons in which runners accumulate points based on how they finish. At the end of the tour, which takes place over approximately a 2-year period, the top male and female runners split \$1,000,000 in prize money. As a result, it attracts a high number of elite runners. While I won't be taking home \$1,000,000, I still find it very exciting to be part of an event of this caliber.

I don't want to use up too much energy, so I sit down once again. There are some large tents set up for running to sit down, stretch, and relax in. However, after looking inside, I see that there does not appear to be much space for another body. I decide to seek out another tree, but first, I have some business to take care of.

I have to visit the port-a-potty. Now normally, this wouldn't be noteworthy, but as I quickly realize there's no exposure to the wind, inside the port-a-potty is the warmest place in Athlete's Village. I'll admit it, the thought of spending a couple more hours in here to warm up does cross my mind. After all, there are hundreds of them with practically no lines. Would anyone really know? Maybe if the ambience were better, I might consider this more. But it is a portable public bathroom, so I exit and once again take a seat under a tree behind a building.

After three hours of trying to relax, focus, and stay warm, the time has finally come for me to shed everything I'm wearing except for my race gear and report to my corral. A corral is a spot where runners gather just before being directed to their place at the starting line. Runners are assigned to a corral based on their expected finishing time. Now the word corral conjures up images of thousands of runners being herded together like cattle. While there are no race officials on horseback chasing runners to the corral, there are directions being given over the loud speakers.

The corrals are gated areas in which race officials act like bouncers at a club, allowing only individuals assigned to the corral, to enter. Since I had qualified for a guaranteed spot in this year's race, I didn't have to win my entry via their lottery system. I was positioned in a corral near the front of the pack.

While standing at the start, I can feel an incredible amount of energy in the air. There are competitors and reporters from all over the world. The starting area is lined with buses and helicopters overhead. Seeing the Verrazano Narrows Bridge towering in front of me is an awesome sight. I'm enjoying the moment and soaking in the entire experience, but at the same time, I'm very anxious to start. To quote Tom Petty, "the waiting is the hardest part."

Before the race starts, the elite men are introduced. The elite women had a 9 o'clock start time and therefore were already running. Mayor Bloomberg speaks to the crowd of runners and spectators, and of course, no sporting event is complete without the singing of the Star Spangled Banner. Once the preliminary events are complete, the starting gun fires. The 2008 New York City Marathon has begun.

Approximately the first 1.5-1.75 miles are spent crossing the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. There is a median strip in the form of cement barriers down the center, with runners occupying the entire bridge both the right and left sides of the median. Whenever I compete in any running event, especially one of this size, I try to avoid being boxed in. However, I quickly find myself with the median strip on my left, a wall of runners on my right, and not much room to run freely as a result.

There's a guy running in a Spider Man costume in front of me who's struggling to put his mask on. There is just enough room to this right for me to squeeze by, so I pick up my pace long enough to get around him. I take care not to interfere as I go by him, just in case this is the real Spider Man on his way to fight crime somewhere.

There are so many runners on the Bridge that I find it difficult to run comfortably. Making progress involves running around people, while being careful not to trip myself or others. Because of this, I quickly realize that today is not a day for a personal best time. There are just too many people to deal with. I decide to make the focus just enjoying the whole experience.

As we exit the bridge, runners on the right side (which is the side I'm on) take one route, while the runners on the left take another. We will meet again soon, no doubt. We approach mile 2, and there are thousands of spectators lining the streets. The fist sign being held up by a spectator says, "welcome to Brooklyn." This is my first time in Brooklyn and there are thousands of people to welcome me. How thoughtful!

After running about a half mile through the streets of Brooklyn, we merge with the other lane of runners. Seeing two groups of thousands of fast moving runners merge is a very surreal experience. It resembles two fast-moving streams merging to form a powerful river. To organize the merger of these forces, there is a man-made median strip consisting of sawhorses with yellow police tape connecting them. After about a mile, this median strip gives way to a series of traffic islands, which allows for less separation of the two lanes of runners.

Much to my surprise, I soon spot another group of runners to my right. It almost looks as if there is a separate race being run. However, this group of runners then merges with us. It turns out that there were runners on the lower deck of the bridge as well.

Mile 3.5 is where all runners finally merge. Because there are fewer runners on the left side, at mile 5 we decide to cross over at a break between the islands. This allows me to open up my pace and run more freely. It's not until the 10k mark that I realize the error of my ways.

It turns out that due to the separation of lanes when exiting the Bridge, the runners on the left hadn't run the same distance as those on the right. They had run approximately 2/10 of a mile less. I came to this realization when at the 10k mark, there was a section of matting on the road on the right side but not the left. This matting is on the course every 5 kilometers, as well as at the halfway point. It picks up the signal from a chip each runner wears on their shoe to determine their split times, as well as their official overall time. This is no big deal, just that my 10k will show as being slower than it actually was.

This could have been avoided if I had more thoroughly read the course information section in the NYC Marathon Runner's Handbook. I figure there must be some type of course diversion soon to make the mileage for both sides of the road equal. I didn't want to get stuck running further than I had to. Therefore, after passing the 10k mark for the left side of the road, I quickly switch back to the right side, where I should have stayed all along.

Sure enough, at 8 miles this diversion occurs. The runners on the left side of the road temporarily separate from those on the right side, only to reconnect a few minutes later. From this point forward, the mileage is the same for both the left and right sides of the road.

The course continues to wind its way through the spectator-filled streets of Brooklyn. I'm feeling strong and averaging a pace of 7 minutes per mile. I'm comfortable with my pace, and know it's not unrealistic to maintain it. I also am wearing a heart rate monitor to help ensure I pace myself correctly. It's easy under these circumstances to get an endorphin rush from all the cheering and go too fast. My goal at this point is to keep my pace steady and avoid this temptation.

At the half marathon mark, my time is 1:33. As any runner knows, doing math while racing can be difficult. However, it doesn't take much effort to determine that I'm on pace for a 3:06 marathon. It's not a personal best, but I could certainly live very happily with that.

I'm now running in Queens, with the crowds just as lively and numerous as they were in Brooklyn. At mile 16, the course enters Manhattan via the Queensboro Bridge. The Bridge started at mile 15 and ended at mile 16. There are no spectators on the bridge, but I can hear the distant roaring of cheering ahead. At this point I have separated myself considerably from those runners behind me. I feel like I am running on the bridge by myself. I know this experience will be short-lived, so I try to enjoy it.

A runner soon comes up behind me and starts to pass me on the left. As I turn to see who it is, I quickly realize that it's Spider Man. He's ditched the mask and is now running with his face exposed for all of New York to see his true identity. I think to myself, I would like to beat Spider Man, but if I don't it's not a big deal. After all, he is a super hero.

During the final ¼ mile on the bridge, I approach yet another person running in costume. This time it's someone dressed as Minnie Mouse. I didn't know Minnie was a runner; I don't recall any mention of her in the Celebrity Runner's section of the race program. As I pass, I turn to look at Minnie. Much to my surprise, this person dressed as Minnie, is a man. Now I've been a runner for 26 years, and I'm a competitive person. At this point, I'm not as concerned with who beats me, as long as I know I gave 100% and 'put it all out there' so to speak. I quickly decide though, that there is absolutely no way I'm going to be beat my Minnie Mouse. I pass and never look back.

After exiting the Queensboro Bridge, the course enters Manhattan. While I've never competed in the Olympics, I've got to believe that this experience is comparable, at least in regards to energy in the air. It's like an

Olympic Marathoner running through the tunnel and entering the stadium near the finish. It goes from quiet to crazy. There is so much energy and excitement from the crowds, that it takes extra focus to maintain my pace.

The course turns to 1st Avenue, which is also lined with cheering crowds every step of the way. This is a good thing because the course is starting to get tough, and the extra motivation they provide is extremely helpful. What makes this part of the course tough is that it's absolutely straight for 4 miles. This makes it tough mentally. I look ahead and see runners miles ahead that aren't turning. They're just going straight; It's like they're running to infinity. I don't want to run to infinity. What makes this part of the course physically tough is that there's a gradual incline that also never seems to end. Not only are we running to infinity, we're doing it uphill!

Finally the course levels out as we enter the Bronx at mile 20. I'm still maintaining my pace, but I'm doing it a little more laboriously. I've been hydrating and taking Gu Energy Gel regularly throughout the race, but this is a common feeling. I believe it was Olympic Marathoner, Frank Shoder, who once said, "a marathon consists of two halves: the first half is miles 1-20, and the second is miles 20-26.2. " I've now entered this '2nd half.'

The time and effort required to run one mile feels doubled. This is where the mental component of the race becomes prevalent. I've been running marathons off and on for at least 16 years. In that time, I've found that the best way to deal with the mental and physical challenge of the last 6.2 miles is to count them down in my mind. Along with this, I break the remaining miles down into segments. For example, from looking at the course map prior to the race, I recall that the course enters Central Park at mile 23. I make this my short-term goal. Instead of 6.2 mile to go, there are only 3 miles until Central Park. When I reach Central Park, I'll then break down the remaining mileage into additional segments.

The course only goes through the Bronx for 1 mile, re-entering Manhattan at mile 21, and going through Harlem around mile 22. The spectator support is still tremendous and energizing. At this point I'm just focused on keeping my legs moving, keep my pace, and counting down the miles. I feel like I'm shuffling through Harlem. Somehow I don't think that this is what the Rolling Stones had in mind when they sang, "*Do the Harlem Shuffle.*"

I've been getting water or Gatorade at each station, and taking electrolytes throughout the race. I'm still noticing some of the effects of dehydration though. It's taking more effort to maintain my pace, and the surest sign of all, I'm thirsty. I decide that at each and every water station from this point forward, that I'm going to get both water and Gatorade.

I continue to chug along at what feels like a steady pace. However, my split times are increasing and my pace has gone from 7 minutes per mile to about 7 minutes, 10 seconds. I can often maintain a strong and consistent pace through the final miles of a marathon. Today my pace just seems to be fluctuating. I'm experiencing peaks and valleys in my energy. I try to enjoy my peaks and focus on keeping my legs moving through the valleys.

Finally I reach Central Park. While this is a great moment because there are only 3.2 miles to go, I'm not too pleased that upon entering the park, that the course steadily inclines. It's a gradual incline that seems to continue on for miles. In actuality, it was probably only a ¼ of a mile. I keep my eyes focused on the road about 25 feet in front of me, and focus on chugging along to get the next mile marker.

At the 40k mark, I cross the final set of matting before the finish to detect my split time with the chip in my shoe. I'm too fatigued to do much math, but I do know that 40 kilometers is a little less than 25 miles. I think to myself, Hallelujah I'm almost at the one mile to go mark, which in my mind at that point, was the 2nd best point of the race. Number one is obviously the finish line.

The course continues to wind its way through Central Park. There's enough distance between the runners in my vicinity and me to make it feel like I'm the center of attention. It's too bad that I can't put on a better show and pick up my pace for a nice, strong kick to the finish. That's not going to happen today though. I just hope I don't look as bad as I feel. I'm tired and really hungry. Thanks to the incline, my pace over the last mile was down to 8 minutes, which is well below my normal race pace.

I continue to have peaks and valleys in my energy level, only now the peaks don't last as long. I haven't hit 'the wall,' but I can see it lurking up ahead. If this race were 26.3 miles instead of 26.2, I'd probably hit it.

Finally I reach the 26-mile mark, another bittersweet moment. There are only 2/10 of mile to go, but it's uphill, not a steep incline thankfully, but a gradual one nonetheless like the others. In this case though, the sweet

outweighs the bitter. While my fatigued state has probably given me a false perception of the incline, the fact that I'm practically at the finish makes me not mind have to shuffle my tired legs up any hill.

I give my all to get to the finish as quickly as I can, crossing in 3:11:13, 1,855 place overall. It's not a personal best time, but one I'm certainly happy with, and while I may have had 1,854 people ahead of me, there were at least 37,135 behind. I did finish ahead of Mini Mouse, but I'm not sure about Spider Man. That doesn't matter though. Despite being tired and really hungry, I feel incredible. I just finished the New York City Marathon.

