

Berlin 2015 OR The six week marathon - what could possibly go wrong? By Hutz

On 30 August 2015, I decided to run another marathon. Always a big decision, and in this case, a particularly speculative one for a number of reasons. Firstly, my chosen race was just eight weeks away on 27 September, giving me just six weeks to do some proper marathon training, allowing for a two week taper. Secondly, the race was Berlin, so this was going to be expensive (self employment has many perks, but paid holiday leave is not one of them) and challenging, because experience has shown me that long distance travel is not conducive to running fast times. Thirdly, I have to face it, I'm getting old and my body never lets me forget that.

As described in my "Road to Berlin" post, my six week training program went reasonably smoothly, but the shortness of time and other racing commitments meant that I did no marathon-specific interval or tempo sessions. During my taper, the last four days of which was in Berlin, I did not modify my diet at all. I did little or no carbo loading. This was mostly a lack of self-discipline.

Could any of these things come back to bite me? Come on, get serious, I was about to run Berlin, one of the marathon majors and arguably the fastest course in the world - what could possibly go wrong?

The plane flight to Berlin was long and boring. Unfortunately, I developed a bad headache and sinus congestion in the air. I hoped it was just travel fatigue, but within 48 hours I had full on sinusitis, couldn't sleep and felt like s###. This was not good, especially after a similar experience of illness during the World Masters T & F Championships in Brazil in 2013. But all I needed was some good antibiotics, right?

First stop was the local pharmacy. No, we can't give you drugs, you need a prescription, go to this clinic. The fancy artwork on the walls of the clinic should have set off my alarm bells. A very thorough examination ensued, then a vitamin C intravenous infusion! "So you want to run 2:55 for this marathon? Maybe not this time" said the doc. What would he know, I thought. Maybe a lot, because I was then charged 280 euro (nearly \$500) for his advice and prescriptions!

So I started slamming down pills with just two days to go. I caught up with fellow Melburnians Andrew Krumins (fiancé of Susan Kuijken and marathon debutant) for coffee and Andrew Ross (South Melbourne AC) for dinner on marathon eve. I received an unexpected boost when the volunteer who processed my entry at the race expo very kindly upgraded my preferred start from the C to the B group, i.e. immediately behind the elite runners.

The week's weather in Berlin had been wonderful - sunny and still with maximum temperatures around 16 degrees C. Sunday morning dawned exactly the same. I had slept surprisingly well so I wandered off to the local subway station feeling pretty damn good. Number 1 supporter Candice had planned to hire a bike and meet me at three points during the race for gels and encouragement. By now, I was confident nothing would go wrong.

But then While sitting on the train and admiring my flash looking racing flats, which I was already wearing, I realised that I had forgotten to switch my orthotics from my training shoes. I had worn them continuously for eight months after a bad bout of plantar fasciitis early this year. This was like Linus forgetting his blanket or Samson getting a haircut. Farcck! But there was nothing I could do about it, I was well on my way.

Getting to the start line was an ordeal. The queues for the toilets had to be seen to be believed. I had planned to be at the start shortly after 8.00 am, but ended up arriving there at 8.45 am, just 15 minutes before the gun. But I didn't panic because I had a preferred start and what could possibly go wrong with that? Unfortunately, the best laid plans ... Upon arriving at the B start, I found that, unlike the rigorously enforced starting zones in Tokyo, there were no barriers or ropes between each group and athletes were crammed in like sardines between steel fences on either side.

People were simply jumping the fences into whatever spot they could find. In the so-called B group, there were countless athletes with C and D bibs. So much for a preferred start! I was glad that, by the time I had squeezed in, I only had about ten minutes to wait for the gun.

But with orthotics, toilets and overcrowding gone from my mind, this was my moment at last. The atmosphere was sensational as I looked down towards the magnificent gold topped Victory Column which stands in the centre of Strasse des 7 Juni. Then we were off, with less than a minute of shuffling before I crossed the start line and activated Mr Garmin. What a feeling, off and running in a field of 40,000 with about 39,000 of them behind me!

But WTF, now my race number bib had come loose and was flapping around. One of the top safety pins had somehow fallen off. The bib was huge, covering at least a third of my singlet, so I needed to fix it. I decided to remove one of the bottom pins and use it to re-pin the top of the bib. This was incredibly difficult to do while running at 4:00 mins per km pace, but after much fumbling and cursing, I got it done. Surely now nothing else could go wrong and I could focus on my race.

I kept close to my target pace of 4:05 per kilometre to halfway, loving the sight of famous Berlin landmarks at regular intervals. The crowd involvement was fantastic, with many spectators calling out my name which was printed on my race number. At 10k I spotted the Crosbie Crew cheer squad with the Aussie flag. They were very excited and yelling: "Go Mark, go Mark!" I was most appreciative of their support, given that I really didn't know any of them, although it seemed odd that they weren't looking at me while barracking. Only a few seconds later, a Crosbie Crew runner came alongside me and said that he had recognised my Milers singlet. I asked his name and he replied: "Mark"!

I looked for my one and only support crew member, Candice, at our arranged 13k and 22k meeting points, but the crowds of both spectators and athletes were too thick and we missed each other. I wasn't too concerned though, because I had gels on board and was getting plenty of water at the drink stations. The sun was making it a bit warm, but the Berlin course traverses many tree lined boulevards, allowing runners to keep in the shade most of the time, although this is at the cost of running further because the shade does not necessarily follow the shortest line.

The noise was constant, with cheering spectators, rock bands and cheerleaders lifting everyone's mood. But, unlike Tokyo, there were no daikons, cows, fairies, Batmans or clergymen to be seen! I was surrounded by hundreds of serious athletes. The huge field meant that it was impossible to choose a pack to run with, as you were constantly passing and being passed by numerous runners.



My race schedule allowed for a slowdown, because anyone who has negative splits in a marathon is a freak! Sure enough, things started to get very tough from about 28k, which was disappointingly early. I was hoping that I'd get past 34k before having to dig deep into my reserves. Finally seeing Candice at 32k helped, but she was on the opposite side of the road, so a quick wave and a smile and I was on my own again.

By 36k I was getting worried. The strange thing was that I wasn't hurting at all. Even my orthotic-less feet felt OK. But I was slowing down and experiencing a loss of power and energy. In Tokyo, I had been slowed by back and hamstring tightness and pain, but this time I was just running out of gas. I briefly wondered if I would be able to finish. Some strategically placed motivational signs at 38k, bearing messages like: "You've come this far, don't even think about giving up now!" were a big help. When I turned the last corner at 41k, I knew I'd make it and tried to lift my tempo. I knew I was going to finish under three hours, but wasn't sure by how much. Other goals had become immaterial by this point.

But then came the payoff, the moment that made it all worthwhile. I was in sight of the famous Brandenburg Gate. Then I was through, right through the middle of the bloody thing, and I could see the finish! The huge crowd was going nuts, whipped into a frenzy by a super enthusiastic race commentator and pumping music. I couldn't help myself, I started yelling like Lleyton Hewitt. Come on, come on, come on! The crowd noise was deafening in my ears as I sprinted (well, ran marginally faster anyway) to the line. Click Mr Garmin, look at the time, yes, yes, 2:57, you beauty! Then I started crying.

I was as high as a kite for hours afterwards. My body felt fine, with little soreness or stiffness. I was delighted to have achieved my main goal, which was to beat my age, i.e. 2:57 or better. It was only that night, when I started to feeling crook again, that I began to wonder whether my illness had affected my performance. I went down like a sack of spuds over the next six days, becoming really sick with a racking cough and temperature, leading to a chest X-ray in Copenhagen to rule out the possibility of pneumonia or something worse. But ultimately I came good and was able to enjoy a few days in Scandinavia before the long trip home.

Getting to the start line of a marathon is an achievement in itself, and getting a good outcome on the day is even more difficult. The list of things that can possibly go wrong is very long indeed. In the end, the difference between running 2:51, 2:55 or 2:57 was immaterial to me. I loved my Berlin experience and wouldn't change a thing.

Statistical postscript: I mentioned the size of the Berlin field. I finished 1454th (1380th male) and around 10th in my M55+ age group. A total of 1856 competitors broke three hours (compare this to 219 in last year's Melbourne Marathon) and a staggering 727 ran between 2:55 and 3:00 hours, which means that runners in this group were crossing the line at a rate of 145 per minute or 2.5 per second. Runners were finishing at a rate of four per second between three and four hours!

