

Marathon running is a cruel sport – but I don't have to do it, it's an opportunity I have to test my physical and mental endurance over long periods of time that brings me personal resilience every time I attempt one. Each one is different and completing marathon number 12, in Seville – Spain's most beautiful southern city was no exception. 4 years of running marathons and I still have a lot to learn; I think that concludes my state of mind at this time which says that I will continue to be a marathon runner whatever that means. So now you know, this is not a race report with a victorious 'chariots of fire' like ending – but a sorrowful reflection on a day when I couldn't deliver on all my hopes and dreams and for a race that reflected what I thought was my greatest chance of success to be a sub 3:30 marathoner.

In truth, this marathon report began in July 2015 when I joined the 'Melbourne Midday Milers' – in awe of their love for running, their passion for being excellent and their welcoming community, I was immediately hooked. It had everything I wanted in a running group (with the exception that they don't have a lot of women of my level to run with!) and they inspired me every day to be a better runner. I joined training sessions, long runs, track runs, tan runs – any run I could make, balancing the needs of being a busy Mom, a corporate executive & a loving wife in a country where we had just arrived as Melbourne's newest settlers from Texas !. Everyone had been so welcoming and their desire to get everyone to be a better runner – no matter what level you are at was the 'thing' that kept me coming every week. I didn't mind being at the back of the bus, the B team or the C team, as long as I could feel that I was making progress. And I was.

Structured training programs I have learned have been the key to my improvement. With 6 weeks to go before the Melbourne Marathon, I asked an open ended question to Simon Bevege if he thought it was realistic for me to train in time for the marathon. He offered to put a plan together for me which catered for my ridiculous travel commitment during that time and reflective of the fact that my best marathon time to date (New York – 3.45.45) was probably more the exception and I was normally an average 3.55 marathoner. I dutifully completed the schedule and managed to run 3.35 which was an amazing achievement for me – and the feelings of pride in myself, pride in the milers – where a large part of the group just routinely achieves sub 3.00 and even better for those that gained personal bests in this race were beyond amazing. After a short break, I decided that there was another marathon in my reach and with the gentle suggestions of my new 'coach' Simon, I decided that Wangarrata "(Wang) at the end of February was my next goal but with a sub 3.30 in mind. It seemed possibly after all that I if I trained at a bigger intensity over a 12 week period, I should be capable of knocking at least 5 minutes off of my time – or was I ?

The start of my training had a few setbacks – all of which I overcame. The discovery that I had an arthritic big toe (How can I have arthritis at 41?) which made a lot of my runs very painful, niggles on the back of my leg and my ongoing gluten sensitivity challenged my resolve over the 12 weeks. But I kept going and with the constant reminders by my coach and running 'stable' that I was showing improvement, making the goals and really doing some strong runs – everything pointed to a positive result.

I questioned myself, there is no doubt about that, but the questioning became less and less as the days grew nearer. Under pressure, I delivered. Anytime I was paced by a team of better runners, I looked into myself, dug deep and was able to get personal bests. My half marathon time improved, my 5KM

time improved and most importantly my tan time improved. Melbourne's "Tan" was psychologically the hardest run for me – but I did it.

The final test of my running commitment came last month when an unscheduled meeting in London which I couldn't avoid, meant I couldn't run Wangaratta. I decided that my training was not going to go to waste and discovered that the Seville Marathon was logistically possible before my London trip and that's when I put the wheels in motion for my alternative to "Wang" – Europe's flattest marathon, Spain's Olympic qualifier event and likely to be some of the most perfect conditions for a marathon. Simon altered my training program to account for a week less of training and I was now refocused on my new goal for Seville.

My other key to being a better runner has been the coaching. He is not just 'MY coach', but Simon is a coach of the people! He is constantly coaching others to greatness, despite being such a decorated runner himself. Just seeing what he does with his own running is inspirational, but seeing what he does for others is testimony to the person & leader that he is within the running community. He is selfless, humble and gives help to so many other people. During this specific training window, he has taken on the Tokyo Team, Wangaratta Team as well as the Seville Team (me) – and that's just what I know of. I am sure he is doing even more than that and his support, professionalism & enthusiasm for running is infectious. To see everyone under his care deliver time and time again is infectious and speaks volumes of the power of training with a team. There is no amount of gratitude that can be given to Simon and his support, advice, pacing, coaching and 'goal setting; for me this has been huge.....He is, in my mind what it means to be a "Miler" and his qualities can also be seen in so many other Milers that I have run with over the last 6 months – you are all coaches to me and I am thankful every time I run with you all and for what you have done for me.

Finally, the sacrifice of my family and specifically the support of my husband Rod, and our 2 precious girls have been biggest part of my improvement. Rod constantly supports me during races and manages to make my runs better just by being at my races. During the last 6 KM of Melbourne he surprised me on the course (after his 20 hr flight) and beaming with pride and love, I increased my pace and was able to get through those final KMs with a more positive attitude. Week-after-week he puts up with my running madness –knowing that I am a stronger person for it. There is no doubt, that he has questioned (like any husband!) why I am running with a bunch of guys and why there is no women in the group (I have counted 6!). But he has been there, been supportive and I couldn't do it without him. He pulled out all the stops for Seville. He made a 30 hour trip to get to Seville after work on Thursday, put up with all my 'pre-race' routines, mapped out the course, carefully plotting on google maps with only the dedication that a coach could match, arranged bike rental for the day and constantly gave me confidence that he would be there to give my liquids/gels over at least 6-8 points of the course. He is the example of what every runner needs and he reminds our children what it means to be dedicated & strong. They constantly tell me they are proud of me for being a runner and at the end of the day there is no better outcome a Mom could want than to inspire her children to do something great –whatever that may be.

Race day quickly arrived and was typical of other big events I have been to. Early morning start, gathering in the cold, feeling the buzz of the thousands of runners waiting to fulfill another marathon dream. It was a well organised start at the Olympic Stadium outside of town, and other than the fact that 80% of the runners were Spanish, it felt very much like a big international marathon – with one exception, very little women. The pre-race statistics revealed that with the 13,000 registered runners, only 1599 were female. Marathon running has increasingly become a diverse sport and one of the fastest growing sports for women over the last few years, but this has not caught up in Spain. This gave me even more pride at the start knowing that I was hopefully setting an example to some young girls supporting the marathon that women also belonged in this sport.

All of my pre-race prep had gone well. My cold symptoms from the week before had cleared up beautifully, I was very well rested from my flight and had a lot of sleep in the days leading up to the race. I was more hydrated than usual, as I was conscious of the fact that I had a long flight –and physically I felt very strong. A short 30 minute run the day before confirmed how strong I felt and as I reflected on my personal achievements of the previous 2 months, I was confident that I was ready to put 120% into the race. Race conditions were perfect. It was about 7 degrees C at the start, some thunderous music from AC/DC to get everyone fired up and the anticipation of a great run was everything I could have hoped for. I broke the race into 4 pieces and the first part was 0-12KM where I would meet Rod to get my first gels and liquid. He brought a massive Irish flag with him and so I was able to see him at least 200 m in the distance. It bellowed in the breeze and I very comfortably kept a 4.45 pace like clockwork for this first section. Section 1 was complete and I was on to section 2 which was the next 10KM. I met Rod twice in this section for liquids and later gels but something had happened around 21KM. I felt well hydrated and still very strong but I had an enormous tightening in my chest which I had never experienced before. It scared me as it was so strong. I also had a pain that went down my leg making my left foot feel numb, but the feeling past. I didn't feel labored whatsoever in my breathing, and I still felt strong and I re-focused on keeping pace for Section 3. The 33 KM mark. At around 26KM, I told Rod I wasn't doing so great, but again, I refocused on my watch and tried to regain pace to 30KM. I was still on target and it was only after I looked at the splits later, I realized that I was tracking well at 30KM (albeit a little slower) but was 2nd in my age group. I kept going and started enjoying the sites and sounds of Seville. The crowds were amazing, the course was interesting and I still enjoyed the race...but there was something not right. My head didn't feel great and there was a strange taste in my mouth, I felt like something was wrong but nothing prepared me for the final 10 KM.

We ran through a tree lined park and came out in the middle of the oldest part of Seville (before the Cathedral), around 34 KM, and I stumbled....my head felt heavy and then all of a sudden I was on the ground. I came around and there was group of people around me. I had fainted and lost consciousness for a few seconds (I guess?) and strangers were trying to give me water and kept telling me to keep laying down. I remember trying to stand up and with their help I did. As soon as I was on my feet, I started vomiting uncontrollably and 5 minutes later I was still throwing up. All of my electrolyte, water and gels...all mixed together. There was nothing left of me, as I struggled to explain I had to keep moving. Then my ears started to block and I could barely talk or hear people talking. I thought I was going to pass out again. They were 'mopping' me up with baby wipes and tissues and trying to call for help – the kindness of strangers was something that will forever stay with me from my race. They looked horrified when I pushed away from them and said I needed to continue. I don't know how long I was

there, but I remember checking my garmin to make sure it had not stopped. I told myself at that point that I could only feel better – right? But I got worse.....I still couldn't hear properly and my balance was off. I knew Rod would be at 40KM and I had to get to that point. I got there slowly but surely and fell into his arms. Police started gathering around me and Rod told me that they were signaling for an ambulance. I was sick multiple times again and tried to explain to Rod what was happening. I was delirious, sick and faint yet again and he looked so worried. The worry in his face did concern me at the time, but I was not ready to give up. I told him I wanted to keep going and to both our surprise, I put one foot in front of the other and said I was going to finish. Rod jogged beside me for about 300M and I told him to go and get his bike and to come get me at the finish. I know he was extremely worried about me, and it was only afterwards that he told me, he thought I was going to end up at the hospital and he was making mental plans to have flights changed, where he would go to find me and at some point he questioned whether I should ever do this to myself again...he even asked my afterwards... 'what if you died?'. I never thought I was going to die, but I didn't know what was happening to me and all I could do was to keep moving.

Even the thundering entrance through the tunnel to the stadium was not enough for me to pick up from my 8Km pace.... I just had to get 200 M more to get to the finish. I just wanted to say I finished and to get my medal...I wanted the reward of my medal for my training & sacrifices over the last couple of months and I needed that closure of 'finishing'. I stumbled across the line, stopped my watch and looked at the race clock which read 3.50 and realized I was lucky to be only 30 mins past what I thought I could do. I fell into the arms of some other runners and they immediately laid me down, raised my feet in the air and called for help. I remember them grabbing a thermal foil from someone and wrapping me, and I remember the paramedics lifting me onto a 'cart' –and driving me to the medical area. But all I wanted to do at that time was to find Rod, as I knew he would be worried about me and so it was then my mission to escape medical and get out of the stadium. I wouldn't let them keep me there, but I didn't know if I could stand without vomiting again, and so I waited for a couple of minutes and convinced a volunteer to escort me outside which they did.

I can't thank the Spanish people enough for what they did for me at the end of the race – the runners who held me, the paramedics who took care of me and I have no way to see them and thank them again. They also put up with my stubborn behavior to leave and I eventually got to a point where another runner gave me his phone so I could call Rod. He found me, loaded me onto a bus and got me back to the hotel.

The hotel staff were gracious and kind and Rod kept checking that I wasn't getting worse. I shivered and shook until I finally had a hot shower and laid down wrapped in towels and blankets. My color slowly came back and after 2 bottles of chocolate milk stayed down dutifully in my stomach, I started feeling settled for the first time since earlier that afternoon.

The enormity and disappointment at what had just happened started to settle into my psyche and if I had the tears I would have cried uncontrollably. But there was nothing left of me – I was a shadow of the runner that I thought I could be and nothing could rescue me from the black hole of the following hours. Rod was patient, calming and as loving as any partner could be at a time like this and with some encouragement, I decided it was time to get up and see if I could walk and get something to eat. We finally settled into a gorgeous café in the town, ordered some tapas & sangria (I barely touched it) and

returned to the hotel. The staff were forever gracious and made me feel like a hero, but the sadness continued as to what could have been.

It's now 24 hours since the event, and I think I feel worse today. As I make my way back to London for work, and Rod has now left to return to Melbourne, I told him that I didn't know what was next for me. He wisely counselled me that I needed to not think about that or make any decisions in the following days. He also told me to talk to my coach when I was ready to discuss what I could do next. He is right of course.....and all I want to do is to run as soon as I arrive at my next destination. I guess I am still a runner afterall.

The support I received from my family, friends and the Milers who were tracking the progress of the race on Facebook and showered me with virtual support and kindness after the race was truly amazing. The Milers are a true representation of the running world at large, who I encountered this weekend I am fortunate to have them. I don't know how this running chapter of my life will end, but I know I did what I could – I ran all the miles (936 KM), radically controlled my diet and mentally 'turned up' every day for my run, no matter how hard or how early it was and so for that I am thankful. I would have liked to have said it was 'about the journey and not about the destination', but I can't. That's not how I tick, and it was all about the destination of being a sub 3:30 marathoner which has alluded me for another day....if there is another day.