

Melbourne Marathon 2016

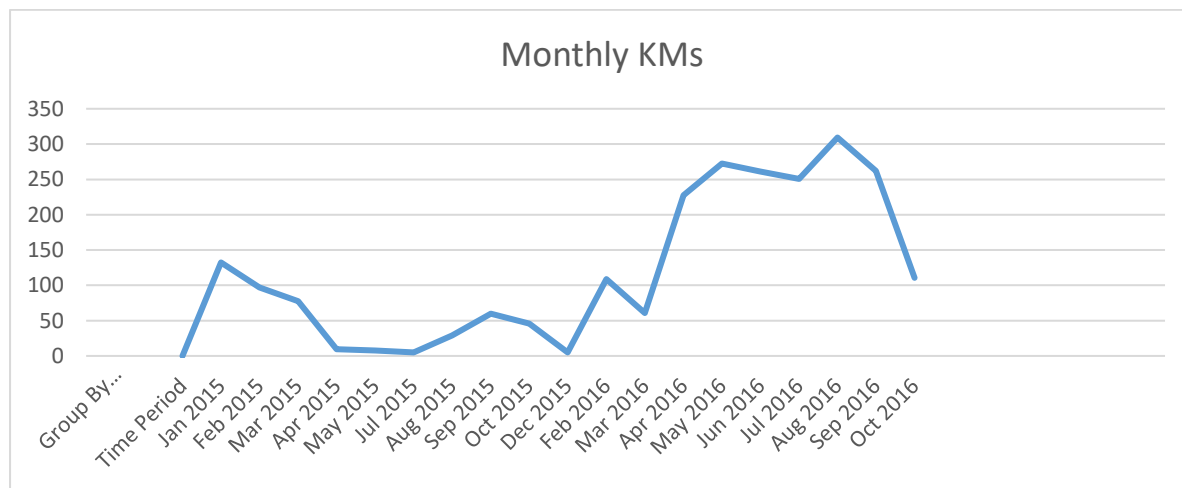
Ewen “Smurf” Vowels

The Road To

In December of 2014 after a slow and easy WKK run my right hamstring tendon started aching quite severely. Unfortunately this never healed properly and after multiple treatments, countless hours of pilates/rehab and a lot of physio it was still preventing me from running. In April 2015 I more or less gave up on the tendon and took 3 months off. Another failed comeback attempt and I had to take another 3 months off in November 2015. Finally in Feb 2016 I was able to get through a few easy jogs, so I started the slow road back to fitness.

First run of the season was a 15:47 Tan @ 4:12/km in Feb. It was clear that it was going to be a long and slow process. I was gradually able to build the weekly KMs and thankfully each race got slightly faster and a bit easier. I peaked at 105km for a week and averaged around 62km for the 16 weeks leading into the marathon. I erred on the side of caution during this campaign and took extra days off and easy weeks if I was feeling any niggles. About three weeks out I started having left hip flexor issues (which led to OP in 2013) and backed right off in order to hit the start line fresh.

I managed to drop 13-14kg from my worst weight and was in the best shape I could be given the trials and tribulations of the last few years (not just injury related, but that’s another story).



Race Day

The wind woke me up around 1am so I knew it was going to be a tough day out. Got up at 4:15am to have a light breakfast and get ready and was on the bike at 6am and off to the G.

There was a security check for the bag drop and I got a bit worried I'd miss the start but thankfully we got through the massive queue pretty quickly.

Made it to the start line and was happy to see a bunch of nervous Milers waiting start. Said hi to a few and wished them luck then found House, Hally and David Munro as we were all starting with the 2:50 pacer.

Finally the race started and we worked our way through the VIR runners (who went backwards through the field at a rate of knots). First few KMs were very congested but once we hit St Kilda Rd there was 4 of us near the 2:50 pacer and we headed up the road with some light banter.

About 5km in both Hally and I reckoned that it was too damn hot and it wasn't feeling as easy as it should. We had the tailwind but it was far from comfortable. Coming around onto Fitzroy St was fine but when we turned towards Albert Park we hit the wind head on for the first time and it felt very unpleasant. At least the first Miler pit stop was just around the corner so I focused on that instead of the wind. Just ahead there was a huge group of Milers decked out in Miler Red – great sign and an instant boost. First drink handover from Dozer was all smiles – photo below was (probably) the last time I smiled during the run.



It was already getting hot so I sprayed some of my precious water on my head – much to House's disgust. He got a bit lippy so he copped some extra spray as well!

Moving around Albert Park at Pit Lane I saw Bevo moving strongly in the opposite direction. He looked comfortable at this stage and was well and truly at the pointy end of the field. David Munro (new Miler) was obviously feeling very good and he moved quickly ahead of House, Hally and myself. Passing the field in the opposite direction I saw most of the Milers

who were travelling fairly well at this stage but the wind would surely take its toll pretty soon.

Travelling down Fitzroy St and the pacer (David Staehr) decided to try and catch up some time on the downhill. The surge put us all under a bit more pressure but nothing terrible – yet. Second drink handover went smoothly and I saw the family which was comforting. I think we were all dreading turning onto the Esplanade and when we did the effort went up a notch even though the pace went down. Every cross street there were massive gusts of wind blasting us through the gaps in the houses and high rises. Melbourne had turned on a stinker, but there was no pulling out now. The only thing to do was to look forward to the turn around and the tailwind – there was nothing else to enjoy about this stretch of the course.

Saw Mitho jogging and pacing some Milers and Stevie W out on the bike. Every friendly face was a blessing and I tried to watch for other runners as a distraction to the effort. I saw Bevo flying along with the tailwind with Magnus by his side. He was still looking strong, in stark contrast to most of the other runners nearby. Saw Fitter and 700 headed back along the Esplanade and both looked far worse for wear, David Munro was not far behind them looking as fresh as a daisy in comparison.

Finally hit the turn around and the tailwind shot us off like a cannon. The only problem was that the pacer decided to make back some time and up the pace even more. Hally was clearly not enjoying the run and House was looking good but had stopped talking (as much), so I knew we were all starting to hurt.

First big decision of the day was made here. I was slowly losing ground on the pacer and it was hard to match the speed of the group, but I knew if I let them go there'd be zero chance of me getting close to my target time – and I'd really struggle to run the headwind back to town at the 25km turn for home. Once the decision was made, I upped the pace knowing that I'd be leaving my fellow Milers behind but there was no other option at this point. At the Miler drink handover at 21km I grabbed my drink but asked for my hat (soaked with water) as it was starting to heat up and the last thing I needed was to overheat. Every drink station was half a cup of water in the mouth, the rest on the head to keep cool.

Coming up to the 25km turn around I finally caught up to 700 who was having a rough day out. Said a few words then pushed on to stay with the 2:50 bus – which was rapidly declining in size. A little surge was required to catch them at the turn around, but I knew even a 10 metre gap would be very hard to close down given the headwind. I kept expecting to see Fitter who had been slowing, but he must have found his second wind (* turns out it was a nature break) – in either case I didn't see him again.

The U-turn was made, and it was every runners worst nightmare. 10km of brutal block headwind with massive wind gusts buffeting us the whole way. The highlight was seeing a stream of Milers coming the other way including Bermuda, Smoothy, Sparky, Courts (with a brilliant head tilt going on) and Roche who was in the hurt locker. The bus quickled dwindled from twenty to fifteen to ten. I was struggling at the 28KM handover, so I asked

Dozer to bring the drinks in a K or so. I know it was almost no effort, but I didn't want to have to worry about drinks or gels at the time so I thought I'd delay it for a little while.

By the time we hit Fitzroy St we were down to six runners. My hat goes off to David Staehr who ran this entire stretch at the front of the pack, encouraging us to get in the slipstream and save energy. The effort and sacrifice was to take its toll on him just a few KMs down the road. I got a high five from PM and my sister (down from Sydney) ran with me for a couple of hundred metres which was good but I was starting to dangle off the group. It took a huge mental effort to hold onto the pacing group up Fitzroy St and by the time I got to the top there was a thirty metre gap. A little desperation was starting to sink in, but I knew if I lost them here it was still 12km to go by myself – and most of the St Kilda Rd was straight into the wind.

This is where the support really started to kick in. Dozer caught up and rode beside the remnants of the 2:50 group. He gave me water and much needed words of encouragement. Over the next 5km a small gap would open up and Dozer would urge me to close it down. I was hanging by a thread and we both knew it, but every time I'd find a little bit more to catch up to the group. About 33km the pacer cracked. The bloke who'd paced the last six Melbourne Marathon 2:50 bus groups said "If you want 2:50 today, it'll have to be without me". Two of the group pushed off and the other guy and I tried to hold on for just a bit longer.

34km and the real marathon race started – I took my final drink and gel from Dozer and shuffled on. The right hammy and glute were incredibly tight and it was getting very tough to run. The elastic band finally broke and I finally lost my place on the bus. I went under the bridge on St Kilda Road and I wasn't looking forward to Birdwood Avenue at all. Within the first hundred metres my left hip flexor gave up. Fark. Dozer and Stacey (Mrs Dozer) were there with some cheering and support, so was Slips and Racer (I think). Every bit of encouragement made a difference and I willed myself up the hill. I kept catching my left foot as I'd lost a lot of power from the hip flexor issue, but stayed upright and kept the pacer locked in around 1-200m ahead of me. It was carnage, there were a few people walk/running and no one was looking too good. Near the top of the hill I saw Hutz and his Long Lens, his timing was perfect was there to catch me at my "Running Ugly" best. He said all the right words to get me to the top of the hill. I told him not to take a picture as it might break the lens (see below).



Turning onto Domain Rd the downhill made the hip flexor feel a lot better. I couldn't get the pace up, but at least it wasn't getting worse and the pain had stopped (more or less). More much needed support from Hutz, Slips, Dozer and Racer as I headed for home. 38km came and went – less than a Tan to go which is a good milestone to get to. At this point anything to distract from the running is good, so I asked the volunteers at the 39km drinks station to throw all the water on me. It helped to snap me out of the lull and focus on the finish. I yelled something incomprehensible to the group of Milers near here and set my sights on getting the job done.

Slowest split ticked over at 41km and I was well and truly cooked. At least the finish line was close, so I gathered what energy I had and tried to lift the pace to the finish. It barely worked but soon I was in the home stretch. I could hear the cheering and music from the 'G and ran onto the hallowed turf and across the line.

Dozer hit the nail on the head when he said at the end of the day the only person judging you was the one in the mirror. I couldn't have done much more on the day and crossed the line with nothing left to give. From where I came from it was a great result and I was happy to get through relatively unscathed given the conditions.

Aftermath

Almost everyone crossing the line looked like they'd aged a few years during the day. Except David Munro – who looked like he was ready to go back for seconds. A seriously good run by him. I also saw Bevo who'd smashed his PB in shocking conditions and looked pretty fresh as well. Sean Helmut (new Miler) crossed shortly after me and was ecstatic with a big PB.

House was just behind and looked pretty good for a guy who wasn't running 42km a week for training! Fitter came next looking how I felt. Bermuda not far behind (who'd had a great second half), then Pete Larsen, Hally and 700 making it in under 3. The staff were trying to move us on so I hobbled down the ramp, grabbed my medal and headed for a quick massage. I needed help to get onto the table and had a chat with Magnus on the next table. Out of the G, I found a few Milers and headed to the pub for a well-earned beer and lunch.

Thanks

It's true you have to get yourself to the finish line, but at least you don't have to do it alone. The support from all the Milers was sensational again today. It makes an immeasurable difference having the support all the way along the course – thank you to everyone who turned up. To Slips, Hutz, Racer, Mr and Mrs Dozer – the extra words of encouragement the last six KMs made a big difference thanks.

To Hally, House and David Munro – it was great to share part of the run with you all. It was a tough day, but made easier knowing there were mates nearby.

Rach, Lily, Annabelle and Jamie – having the family along to cheer is very special to me.

Finally to Dozer – you've looked after me on and off the track for the last few years. You know what you've done and words can't express how important your support has been.

Splits

LOCATION	SPLIT			RACE TIME	ACCUMULATIVE		
	TIME	DISTANCE	SPEED/PACE		OVERALL	DIVISION	GENDER
5k	00:19:58	5.0km	15.03 / 3:60	00:19:58	164	29	149
10k	00:20:14	5.0km	14.83 / 4:03	00:40:12	147	27	134
15k	00:19:58	5.0km	15.03 / 3:60	01:00:11	150	29	137
20k	00:20:04	5.0km	14.95 / 4:01	01:20:16	137	27	127
21k	00:04:17	1.0km	14.01 / 4:17	01:24:33	136	26	126
25k	00:15:37	4.0km	15.37 / 3:54	01:40:11	128	24	118
30k	00:20:26	5.0km	14.68 / 4:05	02:00:38	109	18	99
35k	00:20:30	5.0km	14.63 / 4:06	02:21:08	100	18	92
40k	00:22:42	5.0km	13.22 / 4:32	02:43:51	102	19	93
42.2k	00:09:23	2.2km	14.07 / 4:16	02:53:14	102	18	93