

Nagano Marathon 2017 – Scott ‘Malibu’ Stacey

The road to Nagano was laid down before Melbourne Marathon 2016. Once I knew it was going to be horrible conditions (hot and very windy) and unlikely to be a good day out I started searching for another destination to run a marathon in the start of 2017. Nagano seemed to be a high quality event, required no lottery entry and the course, although having a few hills, seemed likely to enable good race times.

In the end Melbourne Marathon 2016 turned out to be a horrible day out for me (and many others). In addition to the wind and heat the dreaded Malibu struck also. While I tried to convince myself I wasn't really sick and the sore throat, lethargy etc was just nerves or a taper feeling, at 20km into that race the bitter truth was realised and I knew it was a tough fight to the end. Fortunately I had Rog there to drag me home that day. Nagano, therefore, was also about getting some redemption.

I was to be joined by JC, Amy, and Leon for this adventure.

The training

Once Melbourne 2016 was complete I set about doing some research on training approaches. I got pretty into it and did lots of reading. Three things set the direction of the approach I would take. The first was a book called Healthy Intelligent Training. The second was an interview on the Marathon Talk podcast with Jason Cherriman, a 2:21 marathoner and his associated blog. The third was the writings and summaries of the approach of the legendary Italian coach Renato Canova.

The approach I wanted to take was quite different to the standard approach to marathon training applied by the Milers. In essence, the approach I wanted to take was to build a strong aerobic base and train in a way more specific to the marathon. This meant bigger sessions but at paces around marathon pace. The objective not being to run faster, but to extend how long I could run at marathon pace. For me session got up to 23km. Further, long runs become more of a workout. These would be done either at 90% of race pace (for me around 4:25/km), with a portion of marathon pace, or with hills. The size of the sessions as well as the intensity of the long runs meant only one session a week in the eight weeks before the race, with the remainder of my running focused on recovery. I also intended to dramatically slow down my recovery/easy running to keep it under 65% of max HR so that I was fully recovered from the sessions. My view based on my research that too much running at moderate pace (i.e. 4:50 or faster) would not allow recovery and only build stress on the body. However, if I felt fresh I tended to do at least one moderate run a week. Running at less than 65% of max HR tended to see me running at around 5:20-5:40/km pace.

The approach I wanted to take was also quite different to the approach that Bevo has guided me through in the past. I had shared my research with Bevo and while at this point he accepted the merits of the approach, he also noted that the more typical Tuesday/Thursday hard intervals approach had worked for so many Milers in the past. Hence while he saw benefit of incorporating aspects of the Canova approach at that early stage of discussions he wasn't sure of the 'boots and all' approach I wanted to take. He had a fair point when looking at the training of PM and House et al.

Seeing how committed the approach I was Bevo suggested that while he was happy to coach me through this, given I was so clear on what I wanted to do there probably wasn't much he could add so maybe I'd be better on my own. While I was still keen to have Bevo involved, he was probably right as I knew exactly what I wanted to do so I decided I would coach myself. In the end, as many of you would know, Bevo incorporated much of the Canova approach in his Tokyo campaign. This was

great as he was able to road test sessions I had planned. He therefore became a good sounding board for me as I embarked on the mammoth sessions. While Bevo didn't provide me with any formal coaching during my campaign I am glad he was still on hand to offer advice throughout.

Some of the key sessions during the campaign included:

- 4 x 4km @102% race pace, with 1km float
- 4 x 5km @100% race pace, with 1km float (although I was tired this day and only got through 2km of the final rep)
- Bevo Badness (3 x 4km@MP, 2km@HMP, 1km float) – my best session
- 3 x 7km @100% race pace with 1km float
- 2km @ 110% race pace, 10x400m@115% race pace, 4km @100% race pace – my favourite session

I had no detailed plan for the volume of weekly running I would do. However, my plan was to run everyday unless I feel I needed a rest. I tended to run around three weeks straight before having a rest day. If I felt like a double I ran a double, if I didn't, I didn't double. During the peak periods I probably averaged around 130km per week and peaked at 150km. I was pretty consistent through the campaign aside from a four day rest I had due to a sore knee, which was a consequence of a form change that arose from a bruised toe – but this was pretty early on in the campaign.

When starting the campaign my goal was to go sub 2:55 as this was the goal I had for Melbourne Marathon. As my training progressed I started to feel 4:00/km was achievable and so this became the goal for the race towards the end of the campaign. As the taper commenced I just felt so incredibly fit. I was very confident of a good race. If everything went my way I really felt sub 2:50 was on.

Maliflu

Sadly, everything did not go my way.

I have now become infamous for 'Maliflu' having gotten before all of my marathons with the Milers. Fortunately for my first sub3 in Tokyo 2016 I got unwell 2-3 weeks prior to the race such that I had just recovered in time for race day. Last year at Melbourne was horrendous and saw me cramping and stopping for much of the last 8km. Pure hell.

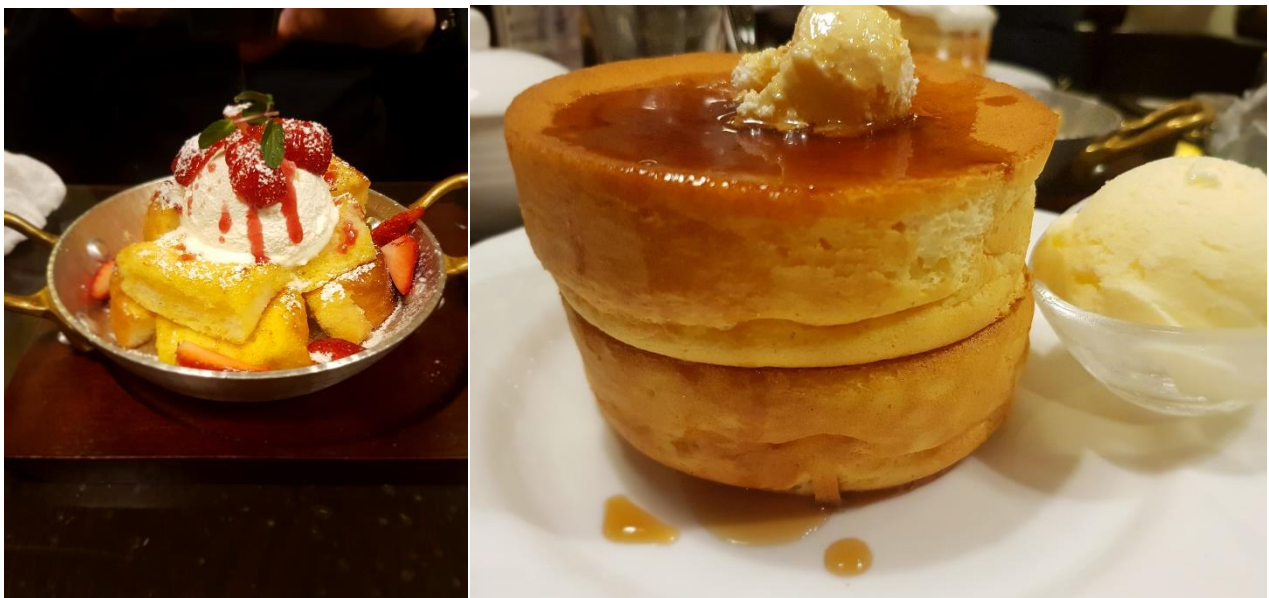
I had really thought I had dodged the Maliflu bullet this time around. My training was all very sensible with lower intensity and lots of recovery. This was also deliberate in an attempt to avoid getting sick. I felt great and my resting heart rate almost never really shifted from 35bpm, which was consistently lower than it had been in any campaign. I got through the final big sessions unscathed and thought I was home and hosed. As the weather started to change in Melbourne, however, I was encountering many more sick people (why can't these people stay home!). However, I thought given I was starting taper and no more big sessions I would be fine, although obviously I still was worried about it (probably too worried).

The Saturday before race day I went to Darebin parkrun for an easy run. I ran with a friend Aaron on the basis he had a pram with him and said he would run easy. It turned out to be a much harder effort than I expected and I didn't feel quite right (I forgot my easy pace was much slower than most people these days). The remainder of the day I felt a bit off. The next day I had my final long run of about 20km planned at Eaglemont. It was a horrible morning of rain and cold. I didn't feel 100% so told Desi and Dug that I was going to skip the run and be cautious. The following day I started to feel I might genuinely be sick and started to worry. I hit the flu meds to see what they would do.

The day of the flight to Japan I felt 100% again and thought I had really dodged a bullet. However, seems the flight had took it out of me. The first day in Tokyo I attempted a short 20min tempo. I got through 13min of this before deciding I felt like crap and this was all too hard. My HR for the run was what I would expect for a half marathon rather than an MP tempo in taper week. SHIT!!!

The following morning I woke up with a resting HR near 50bpm. 15beats above my average. Something is seriously wrong. I felt like total crap. Quite weak. Malifu was well and truly here. I didn't have the energy to even easy run if I wanted to and at this point basically gave up on attempting the race. I skipped the now traditional run around the Tokyo Tan and let JC do it on his own. I was truly gutted and was at various points close to tears. I had to apologise to JC for fading in and out of depressed states throughout the day. I honestly felt that if I could not run in Nagano that would be it for me and marathons. It was just too heartbreaking to put in that much work, that much expense to get here, and then for it all to mean nothing.

On the Thursday before the race I was confident I couldn't run given my experience with this type of virus in the past. On that basis I decided I wasn't going to ruin a holiday as well as the marathon so set about enjoying Japan. This basically meant eating everything I could see and walking for countless hours around the sights. Not something you would do if racing a marathon in a few days! Fortunately JC didn't mind this either as he was mainly out to just finish in Nagano with the chance of a PB if things went well. Out of this a highlight was the pancakes at Hoshino Drip Coffee, I got stuck into both of these below in a single sitting btw (highly recommended!)



My view late on Friday was that if I was any chance of running it would be to pace Amy to a sub 3:30 marathon. I thought this would be better than nothing, but at this point I was not even confident of being able to do this. I hadn't run since the aborted tempo on Wednesday.

Pre race

The day before the race we caught the shinkansen (bullet train) to Nagano and caught up with Amy and Leon. I started to feel a touch better this day, although I was also jacked up on Japanese flu tablets.

Amy, JC, and myself headed to the expo and met Leon there. We also happened to run into KJ there who had entered but had encountered injury a few weeks prior so had to withdraw. The expo was small but good. Obviously significantly better than what Melbourne has to offer. I say obviously because what Melbourne offers is a bit of an embarrassment given the cost of entry fees and the size of the event really.

As the day progressed I was certainly confident of running, the question was now whether I pace Amy or race it. I was leaning towards racing it. When we were back at the hotel I thought I had better get my mind into race mode, just in case I do race it.

That night JC and my got an inspirational skype call from Duff. The essence of his message to me was: 'Harden the fuck up Malibu and race it'. From then on, I didn't really have a choice but to race it. Nevertheless, I avoided the now standard pre marathon Facebook posts etc, the next day could easily be a disaster.

The race

To get to the start line we needed to get a free train and then walk for 20 minutes to the race start. This was pretty fun and gets you excited for the race. The train is only runners and then walking the back streets of Nagano with thousands of runners is a pretty cool experience. It was clear, however, that it was going to be a rather warm day looking at the sun beating down on us.



After final toilet stops and bag checks we headed to our respective starting groups. Based on my target time I was in the B group. This is essentially the front group behind the elites and invited runners. I could have essentially been in the second row of the start line if I chose to, however, given I was unsure if I would even finish at this point I decided to just sit in the middle and not push my way through. As it was I was still quite close to the start line.

My plan was to just set off at race pace, 4:00/km, and see how that felt. While I had a bit of a sore throat and didn't feel quite as good as I did the day before I may as well see how it feels now that I am here. I also had Duff's words from the previous night rattling around in my head.

While there was a bit of congestion at the start the path was much clearer than I had experienced in the preferred start area of Melbourne the previous year and I was able to hit my first km bang on target. In the first 5km I could feel the sensation in my body that I was not at full energy and a bit unwell. Taking heed of Duff's words to me the night before I said to myself 'fuck it' and decided to push on regardless. The pace felt super easy in the legs. The best marathon pace has ever felt. It was like a jog.

I knew the course had a reverse Tan like uphill section from between 4.5km and 5.5. so was fine if that section was a bit slower. However, I hit my first 5km split bang on target. The next 10km were net downhill but with a few rises. Originally my plan was to pick up some time here. However, given I didn't lose any time on the hill at 5km and I knew my energy levels were down I was conservative and stuck to 4min kms. I sat behind some similar paced runners for this period also given there was a bit of wind (but nothing too bad).

I hit my 10km and 15km splits bang on target again. From about 16km things started to feel a bit harder. This made me a bit worried because I also felt this way at 16km of my sick Melbourne run. It turns out looking at strava that these were net uphill kms and so should have been harder. At 20km I am still on track, but just slipping slightly very slightly.

Kms 21-24 were also a slight uphill. Nothing dramatic but it was notable that we were going uphill when we turned around and started going back down. However, these kms somewhat sealed my fate. Because they felt hard I decided to not worry about the target pace from here and just run more by feel. I was enjoying this race, the scenery and the crowd support and I didn't want it to end the same way as Melbourne. I wanted to enjoy this experience even if it meant I didn't PB. Therefore, I made a conscious decision not to push any harder than felt comfortable. For this period my km splits started to fall to around 4:10-4:15/km.

Up to about 32km I was still sitting at sub 3h pace splits. It was feeling hard but not too bad. On occasion I thought I really should try to push the pace a little more, however, when I did the pace did not feel comfortable so I pulled it back again. Again, the fear of the cramp and stopping in Melbourne was in my mind. Was I being gutless or sensible?

It was also feeling very hot from about half way. I was already having trouble taking in water. At some point I pretty much gave up on drinking water and was just trying to get as much as possible over my skin in an effort to cool down. Given the excellent aid tables which were very long I was able to collect 3-4 cups each time and pour them over my arms, head and neck. I would also try to get some water in the mouth where possible, but for some reason was finding this much harder than usual. Sponges were also available at various points and were quite useful. If you chose to there were also bananas and other Japanese foods available along the course at the aid stations.

The other difficulty encountered in the second half of the race is that there are many bridges or little rises for overpasses etc along the course. These were quite steep at times and would really sap the energy. So even if you were going OK you would hit one of these and fade that little bit more. Nagano is without doubt the hardest marathon course I have encountered in the five races I have now completed. While it cannot be classed as hilly it is also not Berlin!. Even Honolulu marathon, where you are required to run over a volcano twice was easier in my mind given the remainder of the course is dead flat.

During the final 10-12km I was not too bothered with what my time would be. I suspected I would go under 3h but I wasn't sure by how much. A PB would be nice and would require me to go under 2:58:02. With 5km to go I knew that a PB was pretty much assured and so was feeling good in that respect. Despite the fact I was well off pace in the final 10km or so I was still passing many more people than were passing me. I guess the heat had a much bigger impact on the Japanese runners given they had trained in the cooler temps.



With about 2km to go I realised that I was still on for sub 2:55, my original goal, if I just picked it up a touch. I started to work harder in those last two kms although it seems all I was really able to do by working harder was stop myself from slowing down more. This was actually slightly comforting as it confirmed I probably was right not to push harder when I was 10-15km out from the finish. I picked it up a little bit more in the final 1.2km where I got the pace back under 3h pace. The final 200m in the stadium was a sprint at 3:44/km as I knew I was on the edge for the sub 2:55.

In the end I crossed with a net time of 2:54:33. Given the heat (around 24-25d when I finished but also with a high radiant heat impact), the toughness of the course, and the fact two days earlier I was not even running I was over the moon with a PB and sub 2:55 marathon. Most important of all I took down CC's PB so I don't have to put up with his crap on that topic any more (we still have to endure his crap on every other topic though!).



Post race

After the race they supply you with sports drink, onigiri (effectively a rice sandwich) and some other little goodies. I also got a massage at the free service provided. I then waited for the others to finish. Leon was the first to appear having run 3:16, about 6min off his target. Amy and JC were taking a lot longer and we started to worry a bit. Eventually they both appeared and we headed back on the free bus back to Nagano train station near our hotel.

Leon and myself decided to head to an onsen (hot springs) post race while JC decided he wanted to have a rest in the hotel and catch up on his social media. It was obvious at the onsen who had run the marathon. The tell tale being the race singlet sunburn embedded on the skin – Leon was red raw. The onsen seemed to work wonders as we found the legs were in decent shape afterwards. On the walk back the hotel Leon and myself did some preliminary planning of the night out. The race has a farewell party for foreign runners and also the elites and invited runners. We found we had just missed this so decided to just head out to an izakaya latter for beers and food. Amy was keen on some karaoke later too.

So it turns out that on a Sunday evening post marathon in Nagano not many go out to celebrate. I guess locals go home and others catch transport to their respective home towns to get back to work the next day. We went to an izakaya and found we were the only people in there (noting it was still pretty early I guess). However, this didn't look good for a big celebration post marathon.

Leon then suggested that maybe we should bail on Nagano and head to Tokyo. Within 20 minutes of this suggestion being uttered we had raced back to the hotel, packed our bags, checked out of our hotel, bought tickets for the bullet train and were on our way to Tokyo. We of course bought some beers for the train journey. We also let Amy know we were heading to Tokyo, but given she had her family there and she had indicated she was very tired we didn't think this would be an issue. Once on the train we realised it was a reserved only train and we had unreserved tickets. We decided to just find three seats together and would play dumb foreigner if we got busted. A role that would not be hard to play. No one bothered us for the trip.

On the train we also booked accommodation online in Shibuya on the basis that Leon knew this area well from his English teaching days.

So after deciding at 6pm to head to Tokyo we were checked into a hotel and at a pub in Tokyo by around 9:30pm. Tokyo was absolutely pumping. This was a good decision. We hooked up with some locals that spoke English and got stuck into beers and the local drink shochu. JC had his one beer and headed back to the hotel while Leon and myself joined some others to go to a club. The night ended deep into the morning maintaining the benchmark I had set with Duff and Joe the previous year at the Tokyo marathon. While this celebration probably is why I was still feeling Maliflu effects a week after, it was well and truly worth it!

What next

Despite not getting the result I believe I could have based on the training, I am now reasonably confident that sub 2:50 is quite realistic for me (although obviously nothing is assured in marathon running). The pace just felt so good early on. A cooler day and in full health it could have been on. This means that while my intention was not to race Melbourne this year I believe now I am going to have to have a crack and see if I can get the result. While I didn't get to prove the effectiveness of the training approach with an awesome time in Nagano, my belief is that it must have helped to overcome the adverse circumstances I encountered on the day. To achieve a 4min PB in those circumstances suggests something was working. So I don't believe I would change much about the approach I took.

I would also say that while the Nagano course isn't as fast as I would have hoped I would still highly recommend the race to anyone wanting to do an overseas marathon. Without a doubt it was the best marathon experience I have ever had, having also done Tokyo and Honolulu marathons. The organisation was spot on. The course support was fantastic, from the locals that come out to cheer, to the on course entertainment (e.g. Japanese drums as you pass under a bridge). The scenery is just something to behold, as demonstrated by the photo above. The fact it seems to regularly coincide with Easter holidays means it is timed well for people to get away too.

Finally, I would just like to leave you with this photo for no other reason except it must be shared:

