

Melbourne Marathon 2017
Race report – James ‘Stringer’ Howe

The first time all over again.

I finished my first marathon in 2004 and have done seven or eight since then. Melbourne Marathon 2017 was the first that I truly ran however.

The pre-Melbourne bit

Late last year I entered Great Ocean Road marathon, which was to be my first marathon since 2014. I'd had a few months of regular exercise and despite having just had the birth of our third child, thought it seemed like the right time to give another marathon a crack.

I trained by myself, for most of the build-up, joined the Miler's in March and started incorporating one session a week into what averaged out at between 4-5 runs a week and an astounding average of 48km a week! You could say that what I thought was marathon training was to change in coming months.

In saying that, I saw improvement from the Miler sessions, recording PB's over 5km (19:15) and half marathon (90:34). I went in to Great Ocean Road thinking 3:30 was a decent chance, but for some reason the wheels fell off on the back end and I limped through the marathon distance in 3:48 and a world of hurt.

Enter the stables

In saying that, it couldn't have been an entirely bad experience, because the very next day after GOR I signed up to Melbourne Marathon. For some reason, despite the blow up at GOR, I set a target time in my mind to break 3:20 for Melbourne, which would have been a 5 minute PB for me and, in my mind, a move to the “fast runner” level. Again, how things would change.

The week before GOR and after many chats with JC I sheepishly approached Bevo and asked if he would have availability for a plodder to prepare for Melbourne. In discussions not long after GOR he predicted he could get me to a 3:10 marathon, and after two weeks of recovery I had my first training plan and the real work began.

To give some context, my first week of training under Bevo saw me run 60km. That would have been the second biggest week out of any of my training for GOR! Things were at a different level and I was loving it.

Having the structure of the plan and the sessions and times to target meant running went from fitting it around life, to something that was a part of life and scheduled like anything else important. Starting to really meet and gel with some of the other Miler's also made a huge difference – meeting Jumbo, Smoore and Dug who were to become constant training buddies and true friends.

Early discussions with Bevo certainly had an element of “I can't run that fast” or “I can't do that session” – but sure enough, the session would be done and the boundary of possibility was pushed that bit further. For me, this was as much training the psychological side as the physical side.

During the 20 week build up between the two races, my weekly average increased to 79km spread over six runs every week. The highlights and milestones were many and memorable, from unplanned ice skating after running on to some frozen paths while on a marathon pace run, my first

Sunday long run with the MMM crew or seeing the size of the “bus” in a 8x1km session in drenching rain.



Finishing it off at AV Burnely half for a 5:30 PB

The training and consistency was paying dividends with new PBs throughout the campaign in 5km (3 separate PBs, culminating in 18:38), 10km (39:14 at a windy AV Albert Park) and half marathon (85:09). Before this campaign I'd never recorded sub-90 for a half; between AV Burnley and Sri Chinmoy Burnley I managed it on back to back weekends, one by 5 minutes and the other as part of a training run having already ran 12km prior!

Despite the laughs and good times, it wasn't all smooth sailing. I had a minor setback with a glute issue with referred pain in my obliques which cost me four days of running, but not too bad. More worryingly I developed a resistance to gels. Having not had problems previously, I can only put it down to the fact that the stomach was working differently with the body running at faster pace and higher effort. There were a few long runs and marathon pace efforts undone by a quick dash off the path before trying to resettle and keep on. It certainly impacted the confidence a bit but I finally discovered a solution in Clif Shot Bloks which, while perhaps not the most effective ingestion of carbohydrates, at least didn't make me vomit so I took that as a net win.

With good runs at Burnley, Sri Chinmoy and in Bevo's Badness, I entered taper feeling more prepared than ever. The level of training, the target and expectation was so different to anything that I had experienced for other marathons that I truly felt like a newby making his marathon debut.

Discussions with Bevo reinforced that aiming for sub-3 was a step too far and we set on a target pace of 4:15-4:20/km – a 3:02-3:03 target.

The race

The plan was to run with Dug for the race and we both met up early on race day, before seeing Jumbo, Smoore, Busta, Desi, KJ and all the other Milers at the G or on the start line. The weather was perfect, it was time to deliver.

Dug and I went through the first 5km and logged our splits: a little fast, we can back it off a bit. Next 5km split: a little fast, we can back it off a bit.... You get the picture. First drink collection point at Albert Park and Stevie Williams expertly met us and got us our gels and dinks. Got past pit lane and pretty sure Dug and I were thinking the same thing – busting for a leak but not going to stop!



Very serious

The 15 and 20km splits were again very steady and we were slightly surprised to see us cross through halfway in 1:29. I won't lie – the prospect of sub-3 crossed my mind, however I also knew there was a long way to go.

Turning back on to Fitzroy St I got my first feeling of difficulty and definitely thought "I wish I wasn't feeling this for about another 5km up the road". Working through the merge of half-marathoners didn't help and we turned back on to St Kilda Rd knowing the real work was about to begin.

Aerobically I felt fine, the struggle was coming about due to a growing pain in my left hip. It wasn't an injury, it was just the pain of running faster, further than ever before and my body pushing back. It may have been my weak hips and glutes, it may have just been my body screaming to stop and have a rest. Either way it was there and I had to deal with it.

I think I managed to get to about the 34km mark before I said to Dug that I was at my limit and I could see he was still in fine form. I told him to go and braced myself for what was to come. Again,

the thought process was “if only this was 5km down the road”. Eight kilometres seemed a long way to try and hang on. At the same time though, I worked out the splits and saw I was still running 4:40/km – which compared to any other marathon I’d done was still bloody fast. The mental games were on.



The most fake of fake smiles at the top of Birdwood Ave

I saw Bevo and Stevie out on the course coming up St Kilda Rd and, while thankful, was also in that mindspace where I just wanted to be alone. It was hard to explain. Enter Dozer on Birdwood Ave. I’d slowed to a walk when suddenly Dozer was beside me on his bike. The conversation went something like “Do not walk. Your slowest run is faster than any walk. You probably want to punch me in the face right now but you’ll thank me later.” He was right. He rode with me the whole way up Birdwood and I was very thankful. Also, once I get my hearing back, I’ll thank Bella for her outstanding and super energetic (read loud) support throughout the course.

Once I got to the 40km mark it was a huge relief and the final two kilometres were a joy. I had realised early that I wasn’t going to hit 3:03 but I still knew it was going to be a huge PB and a “sprint” around the inside of the MCG got me across the line in 3:08. I was beside myself, for both my own run, but just as much for the performance of the other Milers.



All smiles at the end. Relief. Joy. Happiness

The aftermath

It's easy to look at a 3:08 on the day, compare it to the other Miler's on the day and feel slow. The reality is that before I joined the Miler's I would have laughed if you said I could run that time. That time was basically elite in my eyes just a few months earlier, and to any of my friends outside of the Miler's it is viewed that way. It just shows how the people you associate with can change your expectations.

I'm extremely proud of the run and what I have learnt through the process, both of running and of myself. Running now has become a part of my life; it's accepted as standard at my work, my wife and kids don't question it and I find the time to do it. It's shown that what I thought was possible may actually be false, self-imposed boundaries and that sometimes it's good to push yourself to uncomfortable levels so that you can grow.

Doing anything with people better than you will inevitably make you better. The Miler's definitely does that. I'm lucky throughout this to have run regularly with Jumbo, Smoore, Dug, Busta, Desi, KJ and Greg, as well as plenty of other regular faces at sessions or long runs. Thank you to you all and I know we'll all be running for many years to come.

To Steve Williams, I'd not really met you before the marathon, so thanks for helping out with the drinks. It was amazing to see all the Miler's out on the course and I felt so lucky to be part of this club. Again, comparing this to any other marathon where I'd trained and run by myself was like chalk and cheese.

Lastly, a huge thanks to Bevo for his sound advice, support and friendship. We're already working through plans for what 2018 may bring, but I know I echo many when I say thank you so much for everything you do for the Miler's, and for us in preparation for the marathon particularly. JC may be your biggest advocate, and thanks to him for getting me on the program, but he speaks the truth because this couldn't have been done without you.