

The Road to Melbourne

My debut marathon journey began during a lunchtime run in April that started with the usual crew but ended with just myself and Bevo. We got to discussing upcoming events and I mentioned that I was considering running Melbourne, given I'd run 3 halves previously and thought I should capitalise on some decent physical fitness. It was during this conversation that Bevo offered me a slot in the stable and, from that point, it was apparent that my year was going to change dramatically for the better. Clearly, this was an offer very difficult to refuse so, after getting the important all clear to commit from the family, I met with Bevo and we were away. An early target of 3hrs 10min was considered achievable, with the first training block to focus on some speed and conclude with the AV10km at Albert Park in mid-July.

The First Block

The first important step towards Melbourne was to spend less time in the gym lifting iron and more time running and stretching. Weight sessions went from 4-5 a week to 2 and some kilos started drop off in order to get my power-to-weight ratio down to something that could run 42km at a reasonable clip. Weekly kilometres in this block averaged in the mid-70's and I got the privilege of being paired with Dug for a lot of sessions. We were to be seeing a lot of each other over the coming months.

We tuned up for AV10 with the Sri Chinmoy 10km in mid-June. We had pretty good conditions on the day and I was able to capitalise by running a 37:48, which was right in our target range. Given it was the first 10km I'd actually raced, I was pretty happy and would be wiser for the experience in a month's time. The body had held up pretty well during this block, but I was to be sidelined for a couple of days with a minor foot complaint about 10 days out from AV10. No long term harm was done and I was fully fit by the time AV10 came along. However, the weather gods conspired against us and we were met by a cold and windy day which resulted in a slightly disappointing 38:11. A little outside our target but pretty good under the circumstances. It was now time to get some serious distance into the legs.

MM Block

The first session of MM block made me realise I had stepped up to the big league. Dug and I joined what was to be our core training group – Desi, Busta, Stringer, Smoore, Roche and KJ – for a pretty damp first session. I was then to 'ease' into the longer runs with a 30km up-tempo Sri Chinmoy run around Princes Park that weekend, which went generally well apart from a struggle with boredom over the last couple of laps.

There were many highlights during this block, including an introduction to 'the rink' (an icy boardwalk in Burnley) on an early morning tempo, a huge crew for a Capital City trail run one Sunday morning and an introduction to the 3 lap Tan progressive. The comradery and collective goal-driven mindsets on these runs are memories that will stay with me for a long time.

On the downside, I was struck down with my first problematic injury prior to the Burnley AV half that threatened to derail the campaign. Extensor Digitorus inflammation, potentially caused by lacing my shoes too tight before a Friday lunchtime run, hampered the last 5 km of my Burnley effort but I still managed to turn in a respectable 84:28. However, I pulled up very sore afterwards and a second physio opinion, including a sports doctor consult, had me

getting shipped off for an MRI later that week, to confirm (or, hopefully, otherwise) stress fracture of the tibia. After waiting for what seemed way too long, the results came back negative and I was given the all clear to run again, with clear instructions for recovery.

I managed some soft-surface running before I was joined by Coach Bevo, amongst others, for my longest run the following week – 36km around Eaglemont, finishing with 15km at MP. This run included a memorable exchange right at the end, as I was struggling, with Bevo advising that if I was injured we'd stop but if I was tired I needed to 'suck it up'. We both knew my response that I was injured wasn't entirely truthful....

Grand Final Eve saw a large crew gather for the final session of the block – Bevo's Badness - which has a reputation all of its own. After hearing the horror stories from previous episodes, we got stuck in with a bit of trepidation, not really knowing what to expect. However, I was very happy with the outcome, hitting my targets, and I got a good deal of confidence back after the injury setback. All that was left was a 2 hour Grand Final hangover run on the Sunday, still on a high from the mighty Tigers' win, and then it was Taper Time.

The Hyundai Incident

The first day of taper was a scheduled rest day with Tuesday to be a 30min Descending session. However, the driver of a blue Hyundai Excel had different plans for my Tuesday and took me out whilst I was crossing a road, with the pedestrian lights, on my way to the train station. Whilst it certainly wasn't a high-speed impact, it was enough to knock me onto the front guard with my back then taking the impact of the landing. I managed to look up to see the Hyundai continue to drive on, much to my disgust and amazement, then checked to ensure both legs were operational. Thankfully they were. However, it turned out that whilst I could run, later diagnosed thoracic whiplash made it pretty uncomfortable so there was limited taper sessions in the lead-up. I had a physio session on the Friday morning before the marathon and the focus was just on getting more comfortable for Sunday. It was definitely not the preparation I needed or wanted but, as Bevo mentioned, it was all good stuff for the book deal.

Game Day

Once I got to the 'G and met the other lads, it was apparent that conditions were going to be ideal and we needed to take advantage. After the setbacks of the past month, it was decided that I'd still head out on the 3 hour bus with Smoore and Roche as planned, with the thinking that the fitness was definitely there, but it was a matter of whether any back pain would affect the headspace. However, while jogging to the start line with Smoore, I mentioned that my back was feeling the best it had felt in 10 days. There were to be no excuses now!

We got away from near the front of the field and climbed the hill to Flinders Street. I saw Bevo about 1km in and gave him a quick status report on the body then saw my close friend Paul near Flinders Street station who yelled words of encouragement. Smoore and I were in front of the 3 hour bus being admirably driven by Bermuda and Duff, running comfortably, but pace was a little quicker than planned so we decided after 3-4km to start letting the bus come to us. First drinks and gels were taken around Albert Park Lake, with the ever-reliable JC, who was to be my saint for the entire run, on the spot for the handover.



From there on, I shuffled amongst the 3 hour pack as we made our way up and back along Beaconsfield Parade then Marine Parade, occasionally talking to JC on the bike and collecting nutrition as planned. I had gone through 21.1km in 1:28:34, right on track (and a massive 6 minutes quicker than I'd run the Melbourne Half Marathon last year!) and feeling good. As we passed through 30km, lead pacer Bermuda was starting to fire up the crowds, telling them to make some noise, but he then had to turn into traffic controller on St Kilda Road after we merged with the half marathoners, 'politely' instructing them to keep left. It was at this point, around 32-33km, that the legs started to feel some hurt. I was thinking that the last gel was overdue, which it wasn't, but Bevo also magically appeared again at around this point and reminded me that I was still within the 3 hour group and to press on. I then grabbed my last gel from JC and attempted to get it down, which proved difficult but necessary. I eventually took it all in and headed towards the dreaded Birdwood Avenue.

A timely boost came in the form of seeing my best mate Sean and his family, who I wasn't expecting, cheering me on from the corner of St Kilda Road and Sturt Street. This gave me a huge lift as I headed to the climb, as did seeing Beau James on Linlithgow Avenue. With my left hand ringing from Beau's high-five, I headed up the hill towards Domain Road, constantly reminding myself of Duff's advice earlier in the week to ensure I maintained form. The pace was always going to drop but I didn't want the damage to be too severe. On the plus side, whilst Bermuda was a little way up the road, I was still in front of Duff and on 3 hour pace.



After getting the hard part done, I climbed out of Dallas Brooks Drive and back on to Birdwood again for the run home. I gave Paul, who was still sticking around, a smile and a wave, then saw Sean and family again on St Kilda Road, thanking them for coming along. It was shortly after that I concluded that the legs didn't have enough left to pick up the pace again and Duff passed me on the corner of Flinders and Swanston streets. I couldn't stick with him and started to accept that I was probably going to run 15-30 seconds over 3 hours but was going to be happy with this for a first-up effort. I continued with this mindset until I turned off Wellington Parade into Brunton Avenue, at which point Duff started to get closer. I didn't think I was consciously going faster but I passed him about 200 metres before the entrance to the 'G. I was on a mission now and gave a half marathoner a legal hip and shoulder on the ramp leading to the ground after he tried to cut in front of me. About a third of the way around the lap, I saw Bermuda in front of me jogging the outside of the mats, pointing at a spot in front of him and yelling the words that will probably go down in Miler folklore:

"YOU GET HERE! YOU F*CKING GET HERE!"

Given he spoke so nicely, I had no choice but to comply and promptly lifted the pace, crossing the line a *comfortable* 13 seconds under the 3 hour mark. It was great to join the gathered sea of red past the finish line and congratulate my fellow Milers on their efforts, making sure our pacers got the accolades they deserved for their awesome job. After seeing Dug, Stringer, KJ and Roche come in, I then caught up with my family, who was there to see me finish. It was so great to have them there to see my goal achieved.

The Wash-Up

Truth be told, during the training I concluded I was probably never going to be a one-marathon runner. I figured if the experience fell short of expectations then I'd want to improve. If I ran it well, then I'd want to run faster. So, under the careful guidance of coach Bevo and with the support of my fellow Miler brothers and sisters, it's a given I'll be lacing up for another crack, at a time and venue to be determined. Couldn't help but notice that my Melbourne time qualified me for Boston 2019, however.....

Seems I'm well and truly hooked and, for that, the Milers can claim the majority share of the responsibility.

