

## The Quest for Sub-3hrs

I have always enjoyed physical activity and exerting myself. Prior to this year I was a regular runner for about 10 years, getting out 2-3 times a week, doing Fun Runs, Run for the Kids, a few half marathons, etc. My peak running fitness was probably attained in 2011 when I completed my first marathon (Melbourne marathon) in 3:26:40. Still today I have vivid memories of that run; the pride and sense of achievement when crossing the finish line is something I will not forget and is still very close to my heart. A runners' first marathon is special, I think fellow marathoners will understand what I mean.

But I digress! That was then, and this is now....

I joined the Milers in December 2016 on a recommendation from good friend and fellow Miler Luke Pengelly. "Come run with the Milers", he said, "It will be fun!". Yeah right... Luke is a great guy and I generally at least listen to his advice so I looked up the group online, came for a few runs around the Tan, then thought let's give this go. I signed up, ordered my singlet and joined the Milers. This \$20 payment is turning into one of the best investment I ever made.

I still remember my first few months as a Miler, particularly my first Tuesday/Thursday sessions. I would eat dust from Miler packs taking off like rockets around the Tan, flying around AOP; whereas I would finish my sessions in near heart-attack state, close to vomiting; shaking my head, wondering what is going on with these people; they are so fast, and they don't seem to get tired! But I enjoyed the exertion, my chats with fellow runners, and generally hanging out with like-minded people. I could also see I was improving so I kept coming.

As an aside, pace from Miler royalty (Bevo, Stevie, Woolies, Dozer, Duff, etc.) in full flight still has me eating dust and shaking my head, but now at least I can complete my sessions without them being near-death experiences. ☺



Around March-April this year, conversations are heating up within the Miler pack about the Melbourne Marathon; who's running, target times, how to train, etc... Now, last time I ran a marathon was 6 years ago and I still remember it took a lot out of me, but running a marathon with the Milers, the way we are training, I can see this could be epic. So right away I am thinking to have a crack, this is my kind of project. I have no idea what is possible for me time-wise but I reckon as long as I keep showing up to sessions and sufficiently whip myself then good things should happen.

The idea of running sub-3hrs takes hold in my head around June/July. At this stage my run fitness is fast improving and I am realising that I can get through sessions and keep up towards mid/back of the A group (What?! Me?! What's happened?!). Fellow Milers running about my pace in the pack seem aiming for sub-3hr so maybe this is it, why not me too? A sub-three marathon is a proper running milestone which rings nice in my ears. I have nothing to lose so I set myself a challenge, my marathon campaign is now the quest for sub-3hrs!

Fast forward another few months of lunch sessions, easy Tans, hard runs, weekend SLRs, tempos, threshold, some junk kms, etc., now to 10 September 2017 for the Burnley half marathon. With 5 weeks to go until the marathon, today's event is a big test of form and I know everyone is going to run hard today, hopefully I can hang on. I head to the starting line with objective to run with Desi and Busta, which target 1:20 today, and 2:55 for the marathon. Today is serious reckoning to see where I stand on my sub-3hr journey.

The gun goes off and we are away in perfect running conditions. I feel good for the first 5km, but not too long after I start to tense up. The 3:47min/km pace is a little too hot for me today so I hang on for another 1-2km but then sensibly (and sheepishly) drop off and see my run companions pull away. Not a good feeling, not what I had envisaged but nothing I can do. I must now run my race and hope I didn't expend too much energy in that "surge" start. Not long after being dropped by Desi and Busta I tag along with Slips and we run together until the 20km mark, then he leaves me behind for a fast finish with his trademark Fielding kick. I stop the clock on 1:21:43.

Whilst today didn't go to plan, this is a 16min half marathon PB which is proper silver lining. ☺



With hindsight, I was clearly getting ahead of myself with a 1:20 half marathon target time but sometimes you got to learn the hard way. The lesson today is that I am not a 2:55 marathon runner but sub-3hrs is very much on. I am chuffed with this run, but must keep up the training.

For the next 4 weeks I am undecided about my target time for October 15<sup>th</sup>. Whilst my objective is sub-3hrs, I am in career best form and I have whipped myself to a level of run fitness which I may never achieve again, so I want to make this year's marathon count and leave nothing on the table. On the one hand I feel a 2:59:59 target is conservative for me but on the other hand, the last thing I want is to run strong for 35km then collapse in the closing stages and miss out on sub-3hr. Classic mind games that I assume other runners face when setting their targets. With my lack of running experience I struggle between being conservative and getting carried away.

So I chat with Milers, I plug in my half marathon time in race time predictor websites (those indicate my marathon target is around 2:50-2:52, WTF?!), I consult my Garmin (that one forecasted 2:49 at one point, even more WTF?!?!), then I settle for a conservative 2:57 target. I know Courts is also targeting that time, which is good for me as I think running with Milers on the day should help achieve my sub-3hr objective.

### **The Taper:**

With 2 weeks to go until the marathon I now enter the taper phase. The mileage and speed work is done and I feel relieved to have completed my training block with only minor niggles and no serious injuries. My body hasn't let me down which feels great.

My sense is a 2-week semi-holiday from running is too long (I think it should be a 1 week taper) but the internet programs I consult all agree, plus other Milers are tapering for 2 weeks so I trust the brains trust! I get fidgety as I think I should get out more and also think this carbo-loading over-eating business will slow me down on the day. Right now, all I want is for this marathon to be over with so that I can start worrying about other things!

It is on a lunch time session 10 x (2mins on, 1min float) with Bermuda, Courts and others Milers that I will finally settle my marathon target time. Bermuda is making a strong case that with lack of marathon experience I could surprise myself with 2:57, but I could also fall short from a lack of miles in my legs. I mean, Bermuda is telling things I am aware of but this conversation this close to the race feels, it just feels right. I need to be reasonable. At the end of the day, 2:57 and 2:59:59 are sub-3hrs just the same (ha!) so no point jeopardising this wonderful opportunity that I have created for myself. Bearing a catastrophe my marathon PB (3:26:40) in 2011 will get blown out of the water on October 15<sup>th</sup> so let's be conservative. That's it, decision made, I will jump on the 3hr bus, which this year is paced by very handy Milers (Bermuda & Duff). My strategy will be to run with the bus then try to pick-up a couple minutes if I feel good in the final km. I am happy with that, I feel at peace. In addition to our famous pacers, the 3hr bus is also packed with Milers this year so achieving this milestone (if I can hang on!) with friends could be fun. Marathons are meant to be fun, aren't they!

Finally, I must mention that it is whilst tapering that I will have some of the most uncomfortable runs of my campaign. I particularly remember an 8km slow morning run where I felt like shit, no energy, no leg drive, I even got a stitch, heart rate on my Garmin shot up to 170 right away (on a slow run!); not good. That run only days away from the marathon had me most concerned.

So I write to myself if I ever run another marathon and consult this report beforehand:

– During the taper, just relax and enjoy peak fitness.



## Marathon Day

Whilst nerves prevented me from having a decent night sleep I wake up at 4:50am with a sense of purpose. My breakfast is a piece of honey toast with a few cups of water, as per my long training runs. I sneak in a few unconvincing stretches then I am out the door. I pick up Malibu and Courts on the way then we head for the G. All week I have kept an eye on today's weather which has consistently indicated 8-20C, overcast/sunny and zero wind. This is perfect, the stars are aligning.

We reach the G, drop our bags, final toilet break, then head for the start line.

At the start line it feels surreal to be in the preferred start pen, which I obtained for my Burnley half marathon time in my age group. Everyone looks fast in here, I feel quite out of place, like an imposter. The idea that quicker/younger runners line up behind the preferred start pen is an aberration but that is a story for another day. The race announcer calls all runners to the line, I quickly connect with the 3hr bus, set my Garmin, then I am ready to go. It is time to unleash!

The gun goes and we're off. The first 2-3km are chaotic; I witness seemingly unfit runners flying past me on clearly unsustainable paces, I run pass walkers which I don't know how they got ahead, I manoeuvre choke points with runners jockeying for positions, etc. The pack is condensed and somewhat messy but I try to focus as best I can. For the first 10km the 3hr bus is huge, by my unscientific estimate I think about 80-100 runners. Whilst the pack is chaotic overall it is manageable, and it gets more fun as we settle into a rhythm. With so many runners in such close quarters I make a decision to run at the front of the bus today, this considering A) there is zero wind to contend with, and B) I don't want to get tangled in someone's feet today. The decision is precipitated as we got to Albert Park lake upon witnessing a runner take a huge stack tripping on a roundabout island he didn't see coming. I hope that guy is okay. Best run at the front today.

The plan on the 3hr bus is to run slightly ahead of pace early on to cater for possible slow down on Birdwood Avenue and Dallas Brookes Drive later in the race. For the first 10km we are led by fast pacing Duff; those 10km are over before we know it.

The segment between 10-20km takes us from Albert Park to Port Melbourne to St Kilda along Beach road. For most of this segment the 3hr bus is paced by Bermuda towards the front. Not sure if it is the psychology of having gone with a conservative pace, or the 2 weeks taper coming good, or the adrenaline of the event, but I feel strong today. Still a long way to go but so far so good.

The 3hr bus is already thinning (injuries, ambitious starters?) but we are still a big pack. Other Milers on the bus (Courts, Dan Hall, Jumbo, S'More) have joined at the front which is uplifting and calming. All morning Milers will exchange nods and words of encouragements, but none of us are here for a chat today. A few words of encouragements and quick check-ins but that's it; we've been training for months, we're giving this sub-three a red hot crack today. For me, I try to concentrate and focus on my breathing as I think these are keys to my race today.



To be honest , I had completely underestimated the benefit of a marathon support crew, but now I know this is required for optimal results on the day. Not only must “unsupported” runners go through hairy moments at drinks stations, with runners darting in and out to get water, wet pavement, empty cups, etc., but they also don’t get the benefits of having familiar faces looking after them along their journey. For me, I know my trusted Miler support is always a few kilometers away so I give all drinks stations a wide berth and keep my stride. This is a big advantage. Throughout the day I look for GG as I approach kilometres 7, 14, 21, 28, 36km and to be sure he’s right there with words of encouragement and also water (in proper bottle tops, so I actually get some hydration) and gels, which feels fantastic. GG delivered in more ways than one for me today so GG I certainly thank you for that.

The section between 20-30km is along Beach Rd from St Kilda to Elwood then back to St Kilda. As expected the bus further thins out along this segment, by my estimate to less than 50 runners. We are passing and dropping runners, each with their own run stories for the day. I am still running with the Milers crew at the front which feels awesome. I have to remind myself not to get over-excited as there is a long way to go. I am feeling pretty good here so I’d be lying if I didn’t mention the thought of picking up the pace and going alone didn’t cross my mind once or twice along that segment. But in hindsight I am glad I didn’t as I would have blown up and failed in my sub-3hrs attempt for sure.

It is towards the end of this segment that the first signs of wear are starting to appear. I feel slight soreness in my right quad but this is manageable and somewhat expected. The pain is bearable plus my energy levels and morale are good so I keep driving forward confidently. From this point on the mind games are commencing. The worries are settling in and the race is coming into it’s own..

The segment from 30-40km is along St Kilda Rd back to the city, taking in the dreaded hills of Birdwood Avenue and Dallas Brookes Drive. This segment is riddled with pitfalls with fatigue setting in, the half marathon merge, the 2 hills, and just the excitement of wanting to finish strong. Milers are still gathered at the front, with Bermuda now earning his full pacer money as we are heading up St Kilda Rd. Bermuda is in full voice, firing up the bus and screaming out for support from spectators along the course. It is amazing to see and brings so much energy to the pack. After the half marathon merge the whole bus is screaming for slower runners to move out of the way, which most of them comply. But I believe the bus is slowly breaking up as we are trying to navigate the crowd.

At this stage I am counting down the kilometres. Whilst I am hurting, I am pretty sure I have the remaining distance left in me. The question is at what pace? With the bus breaking up I am now looking to make a move. I feel I can do this so at about 33km, S’More is on my left, we are running some distance in front of the bus, I ask S’More whether we should go, which is an offer he politely declines. I think Simon is right, still too early. I’ll stick with the bus a little longer, see how we go.

At around 35km I catch a first glimpse of my #1 cheer squad (Ellie and my kids), which gives me huge lift. I get emotional seeing them and hearing their encouragement. (I am not sure why I get emotional, I guess this exertion means something to me!!) The boost from seeing my family is exactly what I needed so whilst my body is hurting, I decide that now is time to go for broke and I will run the remainder of the race without looking back. There is about half an hour of running left so I want to make sure I empty the tank today.

Going up Birdwood Avenue I am tensing up big time with the heat also getting to me now. With just a few kilometers to go I am concentrating as much as I can and am entering a semi-euphoric state. I can see the 3hr bus is not far behind so I think as long I keep them pacers behind I am good... At the top of Birdwood Avenue I see a fellow marathon runner looping back up Dallas Brookes Drive in full

state of exhaustion, wobbling on his feet like you see on TV, then collapse on the side of the course from sheer exhaustion. There were spectators nearby that went to check on him so I kept going, but this is a stark reminder that I could be next.

From 38km I decide to dedicate each remaining kms to special people in my life. Kilometer 38 is for Ellie, 39 is for Isla, 40 is for Xan, until the end. This gives me energy and helps me take my mind off the pain. Running up Dallas Brookes Drive goes surprisingly smoothly. I look around but cannot see the runner that had collapsed from exhaustion, all good. Now downhill all the way, I am almost home. Heading down Birdwood Avenue I catch another sight of my #1 cheer squad which had moved up to the Government House roundabout. From a distance I lock eyes with Ellie, she knows what is going on and has worked out the situation, she screams to me as I run past: "You've got sub-3hrs!!, You are going to do this!! Come on!!". Hang on, I look at my watch, 2:49:something, roughly 2km to go, quick math; I think Ellie may be right!!! With both hills behind me I realise that bearing disaster, this is a sub-3hrs run! I must concentrate and stay focused, which is bloody hard as I am at my limit. I certainly don't have full consciousness and recollection of the last 4-5km, my body is somewhat on auto-pilot to the finish line now.





The section after 40km is all about gutting it out and getting to 42.2km. I am red lining now, even as I try to finish fast, I try to push but I cannot go any faster. Down the "hill" on Wellington Parade my right quad is cramping so I try to massage it without slowing down. I can see the G now, please legs take me to the end. When I enter the stadium that half lap is pure glory. I sprint (it wouldn't have been very fast!!) with whatever I have left. One final corner, I can see the finishing line, the clock, then... **Done!!!!!!** I stop the clock on 2:58:46.

Sub-3hrs marathon: ☒ I love it when a plan comes together.  
I am very happy with this one. This one stays with me.



### Special thanks:

First to Bermuda and Duff, our pacers extraordinaire, for pumping energy into the 3hr pack all morning. With super steady pacing I barely looked at my watch throughout the run, with every time I looked we were bang on 4:10-4:12min/km. This is except that one time at about 32km going down hill on St Kilda Rd when Bermuda got fired up and dropped the pace under 4min/km for about 200m, then almost completely exploded the pack, ha!.

To all supporters on the course, your support was incredible. This has been highlighted by others but the Miler support was special. Today was culmination of months of training so having JC, Bella, Stodds, Bevo, Racer, Dozer, Beau, Stevie, etc... popping up all over the course, it's a real bonus and gave so much strength as many of us pushed ourselves to our limit today. I guess being a Miler is like being part of a family, amazing stuff from a truly passionate bunch.

Also to the all Miler runners, too many to mention, but thank you all for your support and camaraderie over the past year. I particularly owe a beer or two to Bevo and Bermuda as during my marathon training block I ended up tagging along with their stables on multiple occasions for proper training sessions. That structure has helped immensely. Cheers guys!

And lastly, thank you to my beautiful family; Ellie, Isla and Alexander who lose their husband and dad each weekend for hours on end as I selfishly fulfil a passion. Your support truly means the world to me and I love you so, soooooo much. Xxooxx (P.S.: And you were great along St Kilda Rd. Wonderful supporters!)

### **What's next:**

To be honest I am over the moon with my marathon and my last few months of training. I am proud of myself for achieving a type of running which up until not too long ago I never thought I could come anywhere near. The journey has been hard but also very exhilarating.

Since the marathon I have asked myself whether I will run another marathon and if so, whether I could improve. Only time will tell whether I attempt the distance again, but if I do, understanding the danger of making run predictions (cough\* Racer cough\*, ha!), I think I could go faster.

To go faster I have identified the following areas for improvement:

1. Drop weight. Likely my easiest and most pain-free minutes of improvement come from dropping a few kgs. I ran the marathon at 78kg; running in low to mid 70's would be ideal.
2. Nutrition. I had 1 gel at the start line then 2 during the race (14km, 28km). I had planned for more gels, with more handed to me by trusted GG but I discarded them straight away as I couldn't bear the thought of getting them in. Better/quicker runners take in 4-5 during their races, hence something to look into.
3. Racing shoes. I ran with Adidas Ultraboost which are very comfortable, like wearing slippers; but weigh 303gr. Whilst I like the cushioning, it is realistic to think that improvement can be found with proper/lighter marathon racing shoes. I ordered a pair of Adidas Adios specifically for this marathon but they shredded the skin on the back of my heel on debut in a training run about a month before the marathon. Those shoes have gathered dust in my cupboard since.
4. Coaching. Internet training plans are worth a look but having someone to talk things with and hold me accountable would likely help take the next incremental step.
5. Improve fitness. This is the key. PBs don't happen by accident.

We will see. But with sub-3hrs ticked, this gives me confidence to attempt a more aggressive target next time around. Anyone for a run?



Splits							
Dist	Split	Race Time	Pos	Div	Gen	Speed/Pace	TOD
5k	00:20:45	00:20:45	295	55	276	14.46 / 4:09	07:20:52
10k	00:21:16	00:42:02	297	54	279	14.11 / 4:15	07:42:08
15k	00:21:20	01:03:22	314	53	296	14.06 / 4:16	08:03:28
20k	00:21:06	01:24:29	297	53	279	14.22 / 4:13	08:24:35
21k	00:03:59	01:28:28	305	54	287	15.06 / 3:59	08:28:35
25k	00:16:37	01:45:05	293	54	274	14.44 / 4:09	08:45:12
30k	00:21:17	02:06:23	274	51	259	14.10 / 4:15	09:06:29
35k	00:21:20	02:27:43	245	47	230	14.06 / 4:16	09:27:50
40k	00:21:42	02:49:26	216	45	202	13.82 / 4:20	09:49:32
42.2k	00:09:20	02:58:46	215	44	201	14.14 / 4:15	09:58:52

**Shoes utilised:** Brooks Glycerin 15, Adidas Ultraboost, Adidas Adios (for 10km).

### Training block:

- Duration: 13 weeks, including taper.
- Average distance: 84km/week.
- Biggest week: 108km (week #7).

Week	Start	End	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Total Km		
1	17-Jul	23-Jul	Fawkner Park	6x1km (AOP)	Commute (5.5km) Tan (6.6km)	35mins @sub-MP	8km commute	Rest	SLR Capital City Trail. 32km @ 4:40 pace.	88		
2	24-Jul	30-Jul	10km @Recovery	4 bridge loops (with 90secs recovery)	To Grainge Rd @slr pace	Session at AOP 10 x 600m on 3:15	60mins SLR	Rest	Capital City Trail (32km) uptempo (@ 4:25 pace). Last 10km on marathon pace.	86		
3	31-Jul	6-Aug	10km @Recovery	1x3km, 2x2km, 3x1km	Fawkner Park	Descending set	Rest	13.5km tempo/SLR. Junk kms, should have run yesterday instead.	SLR Capital City Trail+some. 35km@ 4:45 pace.	87		
4	7-Aug	13-Aug	8km @Recovery	7x1km (AOP), on 4:45	14km @Recovery	11km @3.57	12km @Recovery	Rest	Eaglemont 32km SLR. Tried pace finish but no energy. Cold/flu?.	97		
5	14-Aug	20-Aug	Commute @Recovery + Hockey.	5x1.5km, on 7:30 (Had hoped for 6 reps but pulled the pin, no energy)	8km @Recovery + Hockey.	12km @Recovery	2x commute (11km) @Recovery	Rest	36km Merri Creek 6 x (5km on 4:30, then 1km on 4:00). Felt good, first time this week.	83		
6	21-Aug	27-Aug	Tan + Commute @Recovery	Milers Session - Killer Loops	Long Run (16-18km) @slr pace	Milers Session - Mona	Grainge 10km @Recovery	Merri Creek 36km, including last 10km @ MP	Rest	96	Injuries	
7	28-Aug	3-Sep	2 laps of the Tan @Recovery	3x3km with 1km float (2km@MP, 1km @HMP)	Slow river run + 2 x Commute.	5km @4min/km + 3km @3:45min/km	Commute home.	Capital City + Fawkner. SLR. (Should have taken gels)	Rest - Fathers day.	108	Top of left foot. Inside right knee.	
8	4-Sep	10-Sep	Commute @Recovery + Hockey.	6x3mins Hard	Easy 10kms + Commute	20mins @ HMP (3:45)	Easy (Hockey Finals)	Rest (Hockey Finals)	Burnley Half Marathon. Target 1:25. Result: 1:21:45	69	Top of left foot. Right knee seems fine.	
9	11-Sep	17-Sep	2 x Commute @Recovery	Rest	10.5 + 8 Easy	3xTan Progressive (15:12, 14:42, 14:37) ** Third lap hard work.	8km commute recovery	Rest	12km warmup to Burnley + Sri Chinmoy Half @MP +4km cool down	81		Notes
10	18-Sep	24-Sep			Commute.	River run (New Adidas Adios)	2 x Commute.	Capital City + Fawkner. 36km @ 4:25 (Oktoberfest - ouch)	Rest	64	Low Kms from busy week at work and lots to do at home.	
11	25-Sep	1-Oct	15km	Alternates 8 x (1km on 4min/k, float 1km on 4:20min/k) 95% - 105%	Commute (5.5km) Tan (10km)	Commute in.	Bevo Badness 3 x (4km @MP, 2km @HMP, 1km float)	Rest	25.5km SLR. Cape Schanck Coastal trail. Hard work.	100	Lingering on top of left foot but manageable. Not a worry.	
12	2-Oct	8-Oct	11km easy	Rest	10 x (2mins @4:00, 1min @4:20)	Easy lunch time lap of the Tan.	Easy lap of the Tan + Fawkner Park.	Rest	1hr - 1:30hr @ easy	59		
13	9-Oct	15-Oct	10km easy	20mins @ MP	10km	20mins @ MP	Rest	3km, easy	Marathon. Target 2:59.59			