Great Ocean Road Marathon 20 May 2018 Geoff Fisher

The decision

I made the decision to run the Great Ocean Road Marathon in early February after I had done regular SLRs at Eaglemont in January. With roughly 16 weeks to go, I would have plenty of time to prepare and the idea of running on the GOR appealed to me because it is spectacular, even though I knew it had hills and the wind is often a south-westerly.

The training

The weekly training plan consisted of the following:

- a long run on Sunday, increasing in length from 20kms up to 36kms over the first 12 weeks of training. The longer runs would include intervals at or near marathon pace.
- a 16-20 kms long run on Wednesday, interval work one week, easy the next
- one hill/speed session on Tuesdays or Thursdays
- recovery on the remaining days, with one day of rest.

Regular training locations included Eaglemont, Princes Park, Yarra Boulevard (Kew), the Yarra Trail out to Burnley, and Footscray Road out to the Maribyrnong. I was lucky to have a week of training in Bright as well (though I couldn't take advantage of the nearby altitude!).

Training generally went to plan. Sessions I got most confidence out of were:

- 4*9kms at 5:00 min pace at Eaglemont
- 4*6.5kms at 5:06 min pace at Yarra Blvd in Kew
- 2*10kms at 4:50 min pace then 4:35 pace along the Ovens Valley
- 20kms at 4:45 min pace at Princes Park.

I missed out on only one Sunday long run, choosing to run Puffing Billy and catch the train back with family.

The only physical issues I had were a hamstring strain at the end of a long run the week prior to Puffing Billy, and being sick for a few days in the week after Puffing Billy.

I was fortunate to get some specialised hill technique from Garth Calder. His HiRT sessions improved my physical and mental approach to running up (and down) hills.

Compared with previous marathons, my training for GOR 2018 was substantially better, in terms of overall volume of running, number of days running, proportion spent on gravel vs pavement and hill training. The table below compares training for GOR 2018 and Princes Park 2017.

Measure	GOR 2018	Princes Park 2017
Weeks	16	12
Days	109	89
Days run	90	61
Rest days	19	28
Total distance run	1,205	852
Marathon time	3:32:45	3:30:51
Elevation gain of course (Garmin)	671m	202m

The pre-run

After a good night's sleep (thinking of a royal wedding!) I woke up just before my alarm and tried to ignore the sound of strong wind outside. After breakfast and getting changed, I stepped outside and it was raining!

Grabbed a rain jacket, got a coffee at 6am from the conveniently-located coffee van and walked down to the bus stop at the entrance of Pisces Caravan Park.

About 40 people were already there standing in the wind and rain as bus after bus drove past. Finally, a bus stopped and picked up the whole group.

The vibe in Lorne was positive – music blaring, people everywhere, a funny guy on the PA.

Bumped into Dan Hall near the start line. Was nice to have someone to chat to as I waited.

The plan

My overall aim was to finish inside 3:30, which would mean close to 5 minute pace. I had twice run a marathon in a time of 3:30, but these marathons were on easier courses (Melbourne in 2015 and Princes Park in 2017). Despite GOR being a tougher course, I knew my training was substantially better, including plenty of hill work, than previous marathons.

Given the hilliness of the terrain, I knew it was going to be impossible to stick to an even pace. The uphills would be slow and the downhills fast. I planned to average 5 minute pace per km over the hilly first 28 kilometres and thought I could then maintain or even increase my pace over the final 14 kilometres and finish under 3:30.

The run

After a slow start due to the crowds, I was moving at my goal pace by the end of KM1. The first six kilometres were undulating and I averaged 5:01 minute pace. The first major hill was the Mt Defiance climb at KM7. It lasted 2.2 kilometres and I averaged 5:10 pace for the first part and 5:01 pace overall.

KM9 through KM22 were undulating and I averaged 4:52. I was making a conscious effort to accelerate on the downhills, knowing that doing so would not use much energy. Over the first 22 kilometres, my heart rate averaged 144 bpm.

The next major climb was out of Kennett River. It lasted 2 kilometres. My average pace on that climb was 4:58 but my heart rate lifted to 160 bpm. On this climb, I caught up to a group of about 10 runners and, as we crested the climb, one of the guys said "That's the last hill out of the way and we're over half way. We're nearly there!" I said "Mate, I'm pretty sure there's another hill at KM26".

Indeed, the Cape Patton climb was shortly upon us and this is when I decided (perhaps unwisely) to increase my effort. I quickly pulled away from the group and finished the 1.6 kilometre climb maintaining a 5:01 pace. (Later I would find out that during this climb my heart rate was up near its maximum at 180 bpm. Even on hills, this is higher than I would have liked only two-thirds through run.) I felt I was working harder but I didn't mind because I knew the remaining 15 kilometres were relatively flat.

What I did not expect was the strength of the headwind. I had felt some strong gusts over the first part of the course but on reflection the cliffs protect most of that part from a SW wind. After Cape Patton, the course heads more west than south and, particularly as the course approaches Apollo Bay, is quite exposed to winds coming off the ocean.

The headwind averaged 40 km/h with stronger gusts. It was not pleasant to say the least, but at least it wasn't hot like the wind at the 2016 Melbourne Marathon.

I pulled my hat down and ground my way forward, trying not to worry about my pace.

Between KM28 and KM33 I maintained a 5:04 pace but I was working really hard, with the heart rate going back up to 180 bpm.

KM37 was the first time I was really concerned about my dropping pace. 5:37 for that k! By this stage the headwind was relentless and the pain in the legs was pretty high. It got worse through KM40 and KM41, where my average pace dropped to 6:10 and my heart rate was in the mid-150s. My stride shortened (96 cm for KM36-42 compared with 110cm for the first KM1-35) but, surprisingly, my cadence remained at 180 spm.

Once I reached the 'marathon clock', I decided to stop and walk the remaining 2 kilometres. After a few minutes a guy passed me and yelled 'What are you doing? Come on keep running. I've been in agony since km 26!'. At first I thought 'get stuffed' but slowly decided he was right. Also, the thought of my family seeing me walk across the finish line was too shameful. So I started up the engine again and shuffled to the finishing straight where Tanya, the girls and a huge crowd were cheering. Samara ran onto the course and lead me over the finish line.

The reflection

Overall, I loved running the GOR Marathon course. Despite its hills and wind, its cliffs, ocean, and winding road are more stunning by foot than by car or bike.

Credits

The Melbourne Midday Milers, in particular all the Eaglemont runners!

Garth Calder for the HiRT sessions

Tanya and my girls, Samara and Tahlia, for all their support and putting up with 'Daddy's always going for a run'.