

RACE Report: Sean Helmot @ Boston Marathon 2019

PREAMBLE

January 2019 – a verging on burnt out 44yo marathoner/fellow coach/hyper-analytic/had somehow signed up to Boston marathon for the second time (well, in part to do it with a running pal and nemesis Ben Briggs chasing American Dreams), in search for a new and contrasting running experience to get me to the start line, and a fourth attempt at a 2:45 marathon (with the previous attempts on flat and fast scenarios – Berlin, GC, Melbourne). Response – had heard Dane speak his wisdom on Inside Running and a mate of mine Scott Stacey reminded me at Steigen 2018 that Dane could be a good option. I contact Dane, turns out he is out of the country celebrating unity with Jess. I sent him my war and peace history, my story, and he responded with the bundle of enthusiasm and positivity that is his essence and star quality (so often not exhibited in the world of coaching). Game on.

TRAINING SUMMARY (in brief)

First meet - We arranged to meet up at Braeside Park for a LR mid-January. I'd only been to Braeside Park once before (a memorable training run with Luke Peel where I imploded). I didn't realise there would be other company – Craig A, Dion F, John and Peter D – all runners a good 2 to 3 levels beyond my calibre. Luckily for me we split into 2 groups – it was clear to me Dane primarily wanted to suss me out before defining next steps. This was to be my first (but not last) classic blow-up in a run with Dane, which I gather was exactly what he wanted to see (I think it was something like 26k@4:24 – with me stumbling to finish it off – only a few months prior I'd done a 36k training run at 3:57 and finished fresh – this was the hole I had dug myself in via overtraining). Over the next 10 weeks the approach was basically – 1 mid-week Mara specific workout (1k alternations peaking at 20k eg. at 3:42 on/4:00 off, or 80-100 min runs with 40-50% of it as fartlek, and Canova intervals at 4-5k per rep), 1x20 minute fartlek on a Saturday (descending, pyramid, Mona), 1 long run typically over Fernie Creek (just epic run experiences covering 700m+ of climbing and doing the infamous 2 mile climb/descend), or Frankston & Mt Eliza (Boston Simulation course that we defined going down Humphries, up Olivers, etc etc), and with flat LRs the rarity (I did do 1 x up-tempo @ 90% and a couple LRs with MP components). Mileage grew from a base of around a century to peaking at 150k, with the 12 week avg likely 127-30. For me, lower than typical. Doubles were 4x per week. I did two parkruns with a PB and debut sub-17 at Maribyrnong 9 days out from Boston at Maribyrnong – 16:54 – pacing by Simon Bevege (his target MP for Canberra). Other datapoints – for the first time in a campaign I ran daily, literally. 98 days without skipping a beat. I also was doing drills twice a week. Anyone that knows my running style would describe it at minimum as unorthodox – so Dane had me on efficiency and form improvements. No doubt this was also about self-belief in myself as 'a legitimate runner i.e. as opposed to a hack (not that I've ever had a complaint about being a hack!).

BOSTON INFO

Boston Mara is held on Patriots day (a Monday) and commences 42.2k out of Boston in a town called Hopkinton (and thus is an A to B course). It is notorious for several reasons – a. it is the

world's oldest annual marathon (began in 1897), b. It is one of the 6 world marathon majors, c. The majority of entrants need to time-qualify, d. it is known for its unforgiving relentless course e. Australian Rob De Castella broke the Oz Mara Record there in 1986 with 2:07:51 (was third fastest time in world), and f. was famously bombed in 2013. It is a net downhill course and the result is it is not IAAF eligible for WR. The profile is largely continuous downhill (described as steep) for the first 5+km, then evening out and rolling to 26km, before then hitting the Newton Hills x 4 at 26-32k (culminating in Heartbreak Hill), then finishing off with a soft descend into Boston. Golden rule is to start off easy (at MP or slower) as if you don't then there is a high likelihood of quad smash from the continual downhill pounding and quad seize either before, during, or after the Newton Hills. Your primary objective in Boston is to get to the top of Heartbreak Hill with legs in sufficient shape to capitalise (fly) on the remaining down 9-10k. I'll come back to this.

PRE-RACE

Briggs and I got to New York the previous Wednesday on Qantas. I had booked the accommodation for the whole trip – this was a bed and breakfast bunking it up for 2 nights. First thing we did off the plane in New York was went for a jog – we located a running track at the East Village side of Manhattan that I knew of – Briggs couldn't resist doing some strides, meanwhile I did some drills. This was a 30 min jog. We had arrived. We jumped on a train to Boston Friday morning – it was the wrong train – we were booted off at Stamford (in parallel I googled how far away was the Stamford track and researched their squad – so professional, with photos and biographies on all their college runners) – we then got on the right train and bumped into some friends from Dungog Australia – nice. Off the train we headed straight to the expo in Boston downtown convention centre to grab Bibs. We had our luggage with us so then uber'd to our Airbnb accommodation in Cambridge – 3kms from the Finish Line. Great accommodation setup – kitchen/laundry/comfy as bedrooms/lounge etc. One of the major aspects to Boston that makes it unique is just how much the local community gets into the race – entrants treated as royalty eg. On the Saturday I was prowling for a supermarket and walked past a spa place that had signage saying free communal Jacuzzi for marathoners – before we knew it 8:30pm on a Saturday night in Boston, Briggs and I were tubbing it up with some randoms. Briggs by this stage had changed his introduction to strangers from 'Hi, I'm Ben', to 'Hi, I'm Ben and I'd doing 2:38 at Boston Marathon'. The power of self-belief – go Briggsy! Boston Marathon would have the best expo than any other I have come across (by a long shot) and one amazing feature is a plethora of seminars it provides free with some of the world's best coaches, athletes and associated professionals providing 60 minute talks. We got to a few – a race preview session with Greg McMillan of the famed McMillan pace calculator (we also went for a jog with Greg who has hundreds of runners doing Boston each year) – Greg had also provided invaluable Boston Mara webinars throughout the lead-in, a Brooks seminar with Hanson brothers and Ritz (Dathan Ritzenhein – 12:56 500m, 2:07:47 Mara) – Keith Hanson started chewing Briggs' ears off in the buffet queue (free) – Briggs none-the-wiser, along with some other elite panel discussions etc. All of this stuff was on-tap and subject to just how much you wanted to consume – what an opportunity. We were active with questions from the audience.

An uber ride on the Saturday had us driving past Deeks and his IMP crew – yep we'd arrived. The Uber driver was impressed when we told him.

One distinct advantage for me was having done the course before. In fact, it was my debut sub-3 in 2016 (2:59:45), and I remember it as my most horrific marathon. Briggs was in luck as an old boss of mine (Adrian) was studying at Harvard so I had tee'd up a course reckie on the Sunday. We met with Adrian on the Sunday who took us out in his RAV4 to Hopkinton – I was on google Maps and it was an intense job reversing our way to the start line – the blue racing lines were not apparent. By the time we got to the start Briggs was in shock (as was I to an extent – I didn't remember it being this relentless) – the whole thing just rolling with hills long and stretched) – I considered this opportunity invaluable for Briggs in particular as I firmly believe that the brain does not like the shock of new unexpected challenges, so it at least gave his brain time to process (and mine). We got some great shots at the start line and were massively appreciative of Adrian's time – was fantastic to catch up too.

The night before the race – Briggs and I were in relaxation mode, had done costume trials, had our race meals, and were getting ready to hit the sack when I received a message from my dad saying to call him – I did – my grandma had passed away. I went straight to bed with my headspace instantly completely removed from the race and onto my family – while we were sensing her death was near, in an objective perspective this was shocking timing to hear such news – instead of doing visualisation I found myself researching flight scenarios for returning home etc etc and for some reason could not get onto my mum. I eventually was able to – I wouldn't be able to sleep until I'd spoken to her to hear her voice too. She assured me to focus on the race ahead and to do it for Grandma. I agreed in my head that was the right thing to do in principle, but I was somewhat rattled and conflicted. The role of family, the runner, the selfishness of marathon training, try and stay focused...

RACE DAY

Alarm clock was set for 5am – I heard Briggs get up at 4:45. I stayed in bed a bit and then got up. It was time. We had our brekky, and then took an Uber at 5:50 to Boston Common – this was the meeting place for a. bag drop and b. taking school buses off to Hopkinton Race Village. It was a wet morning. We had bags taped around our 4% - how foolish of me not to remember to bring spare donate shoes. Briggs and I had bought cheapest as possible tracksuits from New York to wear to the Village and donate. We boarded our Bus according to our Wave 1 Corral 2 designation and headed for Hopkinton along the freeway – normally around an hour trip. A girl behind us asked us if we were Australian – before we knew it she was from the Dandenongs and name dropping our friends and was in the know of the Midday Milers. The running world isn't small, it's tiny. During the bus trip it was bucketing down rain so hard that the buses in convoy pulled aside 4-5 times on the highway as they couldn't see ahead – serious rainfall. We had some peace of mind from studying weather that it were to stop pre-race – but we didn't know what the Village experience would be like.

We got to the village around 7:45am, disembarked the bus, and scampered for the nearest coverage – a massive tent set up with a mass population sitting on any available vacant patch of grass. Meanwhile somehow some water had got into my shoe bags and I had somewhat damp feet – damn damn damn. We found a 1x1metre space and put our space blankets down for protection, I took my shoes and socks off to let them air until we needed to head to the start – I had my socks draped over my knees and was intermittently blowing warm air from my mouth onto each sock, although

the thought came to mind that this could be valuable oxygen I may need for the race itself. The village atmosphere is cool, with a breadth of fit looking specimens from across the globe, and the opportunity to converse with some random high achievers. There was a plethora of toilets available to us and with time up our sleeves this is a distinct advantage of the Hopkinton village setup pre-race. Other available options included bananas and Cliff bars.

At 9:15 Wave 1 was called to commence relocating to the start – approximately 800m away. We got to Corral 2 via some enroute toilets and found a section by the side to enter warm up and strides. We entered our Corral around 9:45 with pre-race highlights being a flyover of 2 jetfighters, the welcoming of the mens elites to the front of Corral 1 (very close to us), the American Anthem, and my first Maurten gel. At the start like I bumped into a guy I met at the expo who was also chasing 2:45. He was wearing a Fulham singlet and sure enough he knew of Luke Peel who he recited as ‘oh yeah the ginger aussie’ – the running world is tiny.

At 10am the elites commenced, followed by a 10:02 start for us. We crossed the start and I hit the start button on my Garmin 945 with the following screen – Distance, Avg Pace, Lap Pace, Timer. The congestion was thickish – as bib 1270 there were up to 1269 runners in front of me. My plan was to stay on 19:30 5k's, which would have me on 2:45 pace. Shortly after the start Briggs disappeared off to the side to avoid congestion and get his pace on – I elected to just stay near my Fulham friend. The intro kms were a semi steep descent – I found myself going through 5k in 19:16 with 112m of elevation loss, a couple of seconds faster than plan which I thought ok as was partially running by feel and thought that would equate to around 19:20, so within limits. I could feel the sun and could feel my heart beating – in fact some individuals had removed their tops at the start line. My mate from Fulham nowhere to be found. The next 5km evened out somewhat, going through in 19:23 with around 50m elevation loss and 30m of gain. Feeling ok, but some serious decent over the intro of the course – I was asking myself does this feel easy – was hard to answer. 15km went through in 19:23 again, this time a much more event terrain. At 15k I am questioning whether I have gone out too hard – too early to be asking such questions. I was panting. I started feeling pain in my lower right back – this was unprecedented and I figured my body was responding to all of the downhill pounding. Split 15-20 came in at 19:46 – this was a net climb but marginal, I'd slipped a tad and at this stage my mind is on hang in there for grandma, keep your shit together, get to the hills. I pass through 21.1k in 1:21:43. My lower back pain had faded but been replaced by a referring top right shoulder pain – I figured this was largely from built up tension and I tried to shake it off. By about 25k most my body issues had faded but I had really dropped off pace. Legs.

At the midway mark I get a lift passing the famed Wellesley College girls – my spirits are lifted with the noise and enthusiasm. I slap their hands and try to ignore voices from my legs. This is also a signal of what is to come – I know from my experience and research that the Newton Hills are coming. The thought of them has me walking in my head – my brain is telling me I have gone out too hard and I am completely intimidated by the remainder of the course. Damn you Sean – you have done this before.

My 25-30km mark reflects where my head and legs were now at – a 21:13 split and a blow-up on the cards. I conceded that I will a. just ‘not walk’ and b. enjoy and take in the rest of the experience. Unusual for me I had elected not to use music for this marathon – as I did not want to miss a beat of the experience, regardless of how I was feeling or my own performance. I ascended the Newton

Hills – all four of them, sitting in low 4:20s throughout. The crowds were amazing and when I heard Thunderstruck blaring from an amp near the base of Heartbreak Hill I was pumped, I had zero energy to convert into returning on pace but I was pumped nonetheless.

If you run Boston correctly you can then turn a speed gear on after the last Newton Hill and bring it home for the final 8-9kms. I had no speed gear. Km 30-35 was a 22:06 and 35-40 was a 22:05. My fitness felt great and my heart rate had dropped but my legs and my mind had zero to return to pace. I just now wanted to enjoy and still get somewhere under 2:55..

Getting closer to the finish now I entered Boylston (finish line strip) with a 600m stretch to go – here the noise was beyond real – I elected to jog along the side to interact with the crowd before returning in centre for a jog through finish with 2:52:37.

I crossed the finish line – somewhat emotional, and spotted Briggs waiting for me. We gave each other a hug – he wasn't in a great way and told me that he started 'feeling it' from 16km – virtually the same spot as myself. He'd had some hip issues, and got home for a massively respectable 2:48 – what a legend – not a happy legend but us marathoners can be very hard on ourselves.

We grabbed our bags, then found somewhere to rest – after finding the exit we randomly located a gym – I thought we should give it a crack for showers. As soon as we walked in they offered us a shower – this was amazing and fantastic, this place was first class with all the trimmings. After freshening up and screaming my lungs out from third leg chafing, we headed to the lobby of the adjoining hotel where we had a celebratory limited edition '42.2' beer. Tasted just amazing. After this we were going to head to the Tracksmith shop where there was a cool souvenir on offer – enroute we stumbled upon an Adidas pop-up offering free chiro and other therapies. This was fantastic and we took advantage of it – as it turned out one of the staff members was in Melbourne the previous week and hit the Milers up for a run. The running world is tiny. We then met with Paul King and his partner – he had an AMAZING run and it was fantastic to hear his completely unconventional re-cap. It really was a revelation that you can do all the rights in training and not get the result, and more interestingly conversely you can have a crappy lead in and get an amazing result – no sense whatsoever. We didn't get to the Tracksmith shop, but we did find a bar on Boylston called 'Whiskey's....' and the night began to unfold...

Post-race – in truth, the following 6 days would be the far more interesting story, but shall save that one... 😊

A massive thanks to Dane Verwey and Run Culture for a tremendous journey, along with Vinay Koka from Synergy Fitness for phenomenal strength and conditioning, to Ben Briggs for being a top mate and runpal, the Melbourne Midday Milers for being a bunch of unparalleled legends, Crosbie Crew who I love being able to coach with and Amy Park and family for support throughout. To be continued.

Garmin Split data (manually hit lap at 5k increments):

Splits ▲	Time	Cumulative Time	Moving Time	Distance	Elev Gain	Elev Loss
1	19:16	19:16	19:14	5.03	21	112
2	19:23	38:40	19:23	5.03	30	51
3	19:24	58:03	19:23	5.02	28	33
4	19:46	1:17:50	19:45	5.11	47	37
5	3:53.2	1:21:43	3:52	1.02	1	17
6	15:24	1:37:07	15:23	3.89	37	37
7	21:14	1:58:21	21:13	5.05	60	55
8	22:07	2:20:28	22:06	5.06	63	44
9	22:06	2:42:34	22:05	5.01	20	65
10	10:14	2:52:48	10:13	2.23	20	17
Summary	2:52:48	2:52:48	2:52:37	42.46	327	466

The team – Dane and Vinay:



Pre-race in Boston – massage, reekie with Adrian, jog with Greg M, and various costume shots:



Race Village and the race itself:



Back to New York, with a screaming hangover!

