

New York Marathon

Race day

Personal Account by Warwick Anderson

3.20am, the alarm breaks through a reluctant barrier of troubled sleep. What's going on at this time of day? Finally, enlightenment and the command of movement mean that I can get out of bed feeling remarkably lucid and clear of my actions, after all I can't be late. I cancel the back-up alarm so as not to disturb Sharron and get a basic wash and put on all my old clothes that the instructions recommend for keeping warm at the start. I creep about as quietly as possible but not quiet enough as I get an offer of 'good luck' from the depths of the duvet.

I finally leave at 3.45am and am shocked by the cold, it's 3°C. I am not alone, workmen are about and people seem to be busy going somewhere; my next door neighbour is setting off for the marathon too. I get coffee from the open all night 'dunkin donuts' and get my booked car ride to the start. Apart from the street lights it is still pitch black of course. We arrive at the central library and I am dropped off to catch my bus. I meet a really nice guy called Paul from Brighton and we share a laugh to the start on Staten Island.

It's cold, very cold, and its very dark here, not many lights at all. We are among the first to arrive in the orange area and have bagels and coffee for breakfast. It is 4.45am. Thankfully it's not raining. We find a place in one of the marquee tents, but already it is so full we are near the door and in the way of a cutting wind. I am relieved that as usual I have overdone the clothes and am just about warm, I am still shivering though. I'm not alone in that, everyone is shivering and we are all chatting and sharing notes with our neighbours. It's a good laugh and I meet someone called Nia from Glasgow who is looking forward to her first marathon. Those in the know have sleeping bags! Those who were either mad or hard wore just a black sack, but they looked very uncomfortable, and in some cases, blue.

Two hours later and the sun had made a beleaguered appearance, a milky appearance that however didn't detract from its welcome warmth. We found a place

out of the wind and listened and jiggled about to the jazz band that was attempting to invigorate the crowd quite successfully, they were pretty darn good. Finally the tannoy came to life and those who hadn't frozen to blocks of ice, (I think everyone survived the cold – just!) moved with purpose towards the start. I said goodbye to Paul and we shared good luck wishes. I peeled off most of my layers and prepared for a first wave start, where I was lucky enough to be well forward. There were 3 waves in total starting 20 mins apart. Mine was at 9.40am. The elite ladies started at 9.10am, with Paula winning in scintillating style 2 mins ahead of her nearest rivals - quality, and nice that a Brit won it.

The day had finally developed into a clear blue skied, crisp but breezy morning. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation and the general buzz as we lined up for the start with Frank Sinatra extolling the virtues of 'New York, New York' once more. We were shepherded onto the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge shuffling along for position and sheltered from the elements by the hundreds of bodies. With a few minutes to go and nerves jangling, tension thick as treacle and the old heart thumping like an express train, I had my first gel and got rid of my 'hobo' style clothing to the edge of the bridge. It was amusing to see some thrown from the centre of the bridge into the faces of those on the edge, harmlessly of course, but the expressions were entertaining as someone's old fleecy tracksuit bottoms wrapped themselves around some poor blighter. One final act of patriotism as we listened to the US national anthem, and even joined in the singing as the speaker cut out in places, and there was a bang or hoot or something, and we were off.

The views over to the Manhattan skyline were awe-inspiring. I enjoyed running on the pavement at the side of the bridge so I could wave to the thousands of people underneath. They were waiting for their waves to go and were looking up, spontaneously cheering with the same goodwill that was tangible in all of us.

Gradually the elation reduced and the enormity of the task at hand imbued itself upon me. The bridge was nearly two miles long, the first mile uphill into a biting cold and strong northerly wind. Nevertheless, after the 5 hours I had endured it was such a release to finally get going that I was still too hyped to notice it too much, I was just delighted to be there, buzzing with a thrill of excitement about being part of what we were persistently told was the biggest marathon in the world (although I think London might

have something to say about that). As I came off the bridge at 2 miles I had warmed up sufficiently to toss my tea cosy hat off to the watching police, I was probably lucky not to get a caution. Then it was round the corner into Brooklyn.

The rest is all a bit jumbled in my head; it seems a dizzy myriad of emotions. The support throughout was terrific, the steady rhythm of the race and the peaks and troughs of feeling good and toughing it out. I remember the wind was against us for a long twenty miles as we raced north and then the respite as we turned south or at least that's what it seemed like. I recall being with much the same mix of people through to about 13 miles, losing and making up ground in a kind of ritual that was fought around drink stations and hills. The drink stations were poor in my mind, only cups of drink were offered and I spent much of the time only getting a gulp before choking or half blinding myself. I had a fight with my new heart rate monitor strap that kept slipping and it was really only at mile 8 when I realised if I wet the strap then it would stay up more effectively, so then I was choking, blinding myself, and pouring cold water down my back and front into a freezing gale! Hence the daze maybe, however it still wasn't enough to stop me feeling the atmosphere which was special.

At mile 16 we came off the quiet, lonely and ominously echoing Queens Bridge. I was expecting to see Sharron with the other Children with Leukaemia supporters here and was keenly anticipating some support, as well as applauding them to give them support. I was a little unprepared for how I was feeling coming out of the dark tunnel like bridge into the bright sunshine with a barrage of support and overwhelming noise. Sniffing and trying pretty poorly to pull myself together, and blaming it on jetlag and fifty million other things, I peered around in the knowledge that they must be there. I ran, and ran, and looked and looked, but I couldn't see them, the noise was too much to pick up individual shouts, although Sharron says at one point she shouted and I even turned around to check, but still didn't see her. I kept going and kept looking, but by mile 17 had given up hope and somewhat disappointedly steeled myself back into reality with a great effort and concentrated on what I knew would be the main course, the last 10 miles. Well, if the first half was hazy, all I can say about the last ten miles is that it was a mix of effort, concentration, and unfortunately, pain. I've run quicker and felt fine at the end, but not this time. My legs tightened after a very good 22nd mile and that was it, I had a terrible pain down my left hand side in the small of my back and I had no option other than to slow down. My stride shortened but I was determined not to stop, people

were passing me a lot, but there were a fair share who looked like they were suffering like me for those last 4 miles. There were more turns now and each took their toll, I didn't want to move laterally and I couldn't respond to gradients like I had been doing before. Uphill and downhill were treated with the same grim determination and even though I tried desperately to change my stride length in the last couple of miles through Central Park it was not to be.

Thankfully at this point when I was running around the outside of the park I heard a familiar voice and looked up to see Sharron waving on the corner, this was just the tonic I needed and I realised that with 1 mile to go I couldn't fail to finish. Sharron had hoofed it along the shortcut from Queens Bridge to the park and had cut off 6 miles to beat me there and I wish I'd thought of that! So with that giving me a final glow to force off the slight despair I rallied my resources and ground out the last mile. The finish was a welcome sight but although I tried to sprint finish I was dismayed to see that I was finishing in a group of about ten people. However I managed a wholehearted wave, breathed a sigh of relief, a quick prayer of thanks for all the supporters on the route, especially the end, where I was willed as much as anything over that line. My legs felt grim but I was pleased to walk on, there were a few who were being helped through and I realised that it wasn't just me; there was a lot of pain about. Of course there were also the 'tiggers' who had run well within themselves, jumping about and conducting the crowd, such is life!

I'll never forget the experience; it was special and had everything for me from elation and joy through 'nearly' tears and a sense of doom at 23 miles to pure relief and jubilation at the finish. The effort I have made to put the race into words can't do it justice but if it inspires one person to go to the lengths to do it then I'll consider it worthwhile, it is a truly exceptional thing to do.