**Death by a Thousand Cuts**

Intro

After finishing my warm up, I quickly stopped off at my hostel to put on my Dunboyne running singlet and pick up a few other race essentials. There was a handy 'take something or leave something' clothing wardrobe in the hostel, that I was able to raid for a top which I planned on discarding at the start line. I paid one final trip to the toilet to squeeze out the last bit of extra weight I was carrying. Then I was out the door and and onto the streets of Rotterdam, where I joined the mass of bodies moving as one to the race start in the centre of the city.

I had to stop off at the bag drop first, which thankfully was on the way. Inside the large marquee that served the dual function of changing tent and bag drop, I applied sunscreen and Vaseline to stave off the twin tortures of long distance running; namely sunburn and chafing. I decided on which four flavoured gels to put in my fuel belt, nibbled on a sports bar, started sipping a can of Red Bull, pondered for a while if wearing either one of or both a visor and sunglasses were necessary, finished my sports bar, decided it was already warm enough and that I wouldn't need the top I had pilfered from the hostel's 'take or leave' clothing rack, so stuffed it in my clothing bag instead. Sunglasses or headgear of any sort are not something runners tend to typically wear, but by this point I had determined that neither of these two triathlon fashion accessories had slowed me down in Mallorca last September. And with the warm and abundant sunshine predicted from early morning onwards, I decided that they were both going to be absolutely vital today.

With such resolve, I made my way out of the changing tent and marched with purpose to the start line. I had more belief in my ability to run a PB today, than I had at any point over the last month and I was walking with a pep in my step as a result. Alas, such mental resolve is not always enough, but more of that later. For now, it was get to Coolsingel in the centre of Rotterdam and find starting Pen B.

A lot of roads were closed off because of the race and trying to find the entrance to my starting block brought with it a little bit of unwanted stress. After jogging around a few side streets, I'd bumped into a few others who were also searching for Pen B. We eventually found it, and after the stewards checked our bibs, we were let take our places with the other 2:30-2:45 marathoners.

I still had 15 minutes to spare and I got more stressed about finding my starting pen than I should have done, but I was relieved when I finally got past the fences separating runners and spectators. I breathed even easier when I saw how relatively few people were inside my pen. I was expecting we would be crammed in like sardines, but it was in fact easy enough to move about. Maybe people who have ran a sub 2:45 marathon are rarer than I thought. Obviously there was even more room in starting Pen A for the sub 2:30 runners ahead of us, but the poor folk in Pen C, holding the the 2:45 to 3 hour runners, must have felt like battery hens. Thinking of them, I felt privileged to have been given such an advantageous starting position.

Now that I was permitted entry, I was hoping I'd bump into Gary Condon and Anthony Flannery. Both had put a lot of time into me in the Trim 10 Mile and invariably they were going to do the same again today. Anybody I'd talked to who'd raced Rotterdam before, told me to expect a chaotic start. Staying behind two guys I knew were going to be faster than me would ensure I kept the reins on in the opening kilometre. I wanted to get clear of the crowds, but I didn't want to blow a gasket doing so and having two more experienced runners to pace off would assist me in that.

I'd entered towards the back of the pen and figured with a 2:35 marathon on my resumé, I was entitled to make my way to the front third of this band of runners. I had taken a few steps forward when I heard someone call my name. It was Gary, who with a 2:33 best time and a realistic shot of breaking 2:30 today, should really have been standing right up at the very front of the pen. I told him as much, but he said he was fine where he was and that his plans for the race weren't going to change regardless of where he started. Who was I to argue? And with a less ambitious target of 2:34:??, I tried to adopt a similarly pragmatic outlook and stood alongside him.

I was introduced to some other Irish guys standing close by, and we proceeded to make small talk about our previous marathon times and our targets for today's race. dublin runner wasn't amongst them though, so I'd just have to ensure I kept an extra close eye on Krusty to keep my own exuberance in check. One of the group of Irish, was one Seán Murphy from Trim AC. I'd ran with him for a few miles in the Trim 10 Miler in February. Fortunately I got the better of him that day. His target today was sub 2:40 and in the race between just the two of us, he was expecting a similar outcome to our short lived duel back in February. My resolution to stay positive meant I didn't argue the point.

The Race

There wasn't much more of a wait between this exchange of pleasantries and the crowd pushing forward a few metres. I wasn't aware of any cue that told us the race was about to commence, but within a few seconds of the surge, there was the unmistakable noise of a starting gun. Immediately I began passing people. Having to weave around other runners moving at a much slower pace left me wondering how they were let start with <2:45 runners. Not having ran a marathon in under 2:45 in the previous calendar year, I had to plead a special case to get a berth in this starting pen. I thought I had but forward a pretty compelling case for inclusion and was obviously successful. However, whoever made the decision on such requests can't have been looking for much evidence if plodders like these had talked their way in as well.

Anyway, I'd sworn before starting I wouldn't let the inevitable congestion get to me and I just took it easy until we reached the bridge, where I had been told things would have calmed down quite a bit. It was certainly calmer than the opening 500m, but I was still having to veer well off the straightest possible line to get by people. I'd no idea where Gary Condon had gone and I was on my own. I'd set my watch to autolap every kilometre and my hope was that all 42 splits would be under 3:40. When 3:48 flashed up on the screen for the first split, I told myself this was acceptable and almost inevitable. In fact it was probably a good thing, as unlike most races I do, it confirmed I hadn't set off at an unsustainable speed. The pace of those around me now more closely matched my own than that of the poorly positioned numpties I was jostling with in the opening 500m.

There was over 41km left to make up the 9 seconds I'd lost and if I'd any realistic chance of breaking 2:35, I couldn't look upon clawing back this deficit as being anything other than easy. 'Steady as she goes' with one eye on my Garmin was my strategy from here. The second kilometre passed and 3:31 flashed on my watch's display. I'd made back the 9 seconds, but this was a bit too fast and certainly not what I had been planning.

Then I reasoned the first half for this split included the gentle sweep downwards to terra firma once we crested the brow of the bridge. I still told myself to back off slightly and see how long the next kilometre took. '3:35' was the answer; just a little bit too fast, but not by much and anyway I hadn't expected all the splits to perfectly beep on 3 minutes 39 seconds every single time. The fourth kilometre took me 3:40 and without panicking, I started the next one telling myself I wasn't going to see 3:4? flash on my watch again for the rest of the day.

Obviously it was important I stuck to a certain pace, but I wanted to keep my breathing under control as well. I was making a conscious effort not to push overly hard and for eight consecutive kilometres, my watch registered times under 3:40 and I still didn't feel like I had exerted myself.

My race so far had consisted of trying to find suitable company to run with. I wouldn't put in any big surges, but I found myself latching onto groups and sitting in behind them for a few minutes. Then I'd look at my watch and decide the group wasn't going fast enough for my liking and push on again. Trying to find the perfect running partner among the thousands taking part wasn't easy. I didn't think I was doing anything foolish, but the fact that nobody else seemed to want to work with me probably tells a different tale. There were a few runners in particular, that on reflection would have been wise to try team up with, but I think how runs unfold in triathlons has moulded me to be of a 'go-it-alone' mindset and this slightly messed things up for me today.

'3:41' flashed up on my watch for the 13th kilometre. 'Nothing to worry about', I told myself. It was only 2 seconds off target, I'd plenty of surplus time banked and in any event it might have simply been attributable to GPS inaccuracy. The next kilometre turned out to be the exact same though. Cognitive dissonance can only be used so often. I knew I had slowed and I couldn't blame satellites twice in a row. Only one-third of the way through the race, it served as a bit of an awakening. It was time to start suffering. I was running a marathon after all and I couldn't expect all twenty-six miles to be a doddle.

I upped the effort a and completed the next three kilometres in 3:34, 3:39 and 3:38 respectively. All three were on target, but I was back out to 3:41 for kilometre 18. Unfortunately, that was that as far as staying below 3:40 pace was concerned. I was 2 seconds slower for kilometre 19, got it back down to 3:41 for kilometre 20, but I had already fallen off the metaphorical cliff. Nothing I could do was going to prevent the slide that had been set in motion and unless there was an act of divine intervention in the second half, I knew a sub 2:35 marathon just wasn't going to happen today.

I thought if I could get to halfway still on course for a sub 2:35 marathon though, it would be something to take from the day. According to my Garmin, I was on track for this, but sadly the laps were always flashing further and further away from the kilometre markers. It was unlikely the organisers of such an illustrious race could have placed the signs in the wrong position time and time again, but I still clung to the faint hope that I'd get to 21km at the exact moment my watch auto-lapped for the twenty-first time.

Needless to say this isn't what happened. After completing 21km, my watch showed a total race time in excess of 1:16:30. 3:42 is what I had ran the 21st kilometre in, which up until then, (bar the opening kilometre) was the slowest of the day. Based on previous readings, I knew I had 300-400m more to run until I'd pass through halfway. But once past the official 21km sign, it was a case of how long can the 97½m be until I'm at the half way point. It turned out to be pretty fncking long indeed.

Not knowing exactly when I'd crossed the starting mat after the gun went, the official timing clock was no use to inform how I was doing. Maybe it's confirmation bias, influenced by what the official results are telling me now, but I'm certain the time on my Garmin at this juncture was 1:17:34. This figure multiplied by 2 was an easy enough sum to do; a 1:35:08 finishing time. While not the sub 2:35 I was hoping for 6 weeks ago, would nonetheless still have been a PB, which I'd have happily settled for.

If only it were that simple though. The wheels were coming off and I would have only loved to have been able to hold 3:4anything pace for the rest of the day. A slow gradual decline saw my 1,000m splits slip from high 3:40s into the 3:50s and finally the ignominy of a 4 minute kilometre. This sort of sparked a mini revival and I found reserves somewhere to follow it up with 3:59, 3:50 and 3:57 splits. My original target was a lost cause and there was still quite some distance to go, but if I could hold my pace below 4:00/km, I would still finish in 2 hours thirty-something minutes. If I achieved this, I would have felt like I'd salvaged something from the trip. I was unable to arrest the slide though and in time that newly revised target too fell by the wayside.

Almost 30km into proceedings, we were afforded a glimpse of the 40km sign on the opposite side of the road. After this, we ran through Kralingse Park. For the first time all race, buildings disappeared from view behind trees and it felt like we had completely left the city. Running under the shade of the trees provided some respite from the energy sapping sunlight. My pace through this section, which roughly corresponded with kilometres 30-35, held steady at sub 4:00/km. I couldn't say I was comfortable, but at least I was consistent and I thought if I could just suck it up for another 30 or so minutes, I might still bring it home in under 2 hours 40 minutes.

It was around here Seán Murphy passed me like I was standing still. Knowing he was aiming to break 2:40 and seeing how he was moving, starkly drove home to me just how poorly I was running. I hadn't a hope of matching his pace and I knew the game was up. He spoke some words of encouragement, but that moment marked the death knell of my race and I just simply packed it in.

I'm not sure what faint hopes of salvaging anything from what was turning out to be a very disappointing race, kept me going for the next 5 kilometres. I suffering badly and I was being passed both left and right by numerous people I had dropped earlier in the race. I doubt they were paying much attention to someone now struggling to even hold sub 3 pace, but part of me wondered would they have remembered our battles earlier on, and what would they have to say about me now if I could have asked.

With sub 2:40 now well out of reach, sub 2:45 became the target. I'd failed to break 2:35, then 2:40, so I use the word 'target' very loosely here. It was going to take a complete implosion for me not to hit this time. As long as I didn't walk (tempting and all as it might have been), I was absolutely certain I'd be comfortably under 2:45.

Two more people went by me in the final kilometre. Ordinarily, I'd try mount some sort of resistance, but I'd stopped caring a long time beforehand and I merely stayed shuffling along at what now felt like nothing more than recovery pace.

When the finishing gantry finally arrived, it was with a huge sense of relief I crossed the line in 2:42:48. With a PB of 2:35:51 from Connemara, this isn't a time I can get excited about. But given the fact I'd only ran 79km in the previous 4 weeks, it wasn't a complete disaster either. From a long way out, my biggest fear was that the painful jog my race pace had become would eventually grind down to a walk. Had this happened, whatever my time, I honestly wouldn't feel like I'd completed a marathon. Pheidippides never walked when he was charged with dispatching the news of the Athenians' victory over the Persians. At the simplest level, it's against this that I judge my own success or failure over the marathon distance. Even if I'd walked on the way to a 2:34:59 finishing time, I'd feel like the distance had beaten me. I've done much slower times before, but I've never walked a single step of any marathon I've done. It might happen some day that I'm reduced to this, but despite everything else that happened, I'm happy at least that today was not that day.