Alan Kenny - Dublin City Marathon 2018

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**Intro**

When picking up my number two days before the race, I was lucky enough to blag an elite number. This removed some of the pre-race panic about getting a good starting position. My brother dropped me into the city and safe in the knowledge that my elite number would give me a very advantageous starting position, I chilled out in his car for 20 minutes or more. When it came time to part, I alighted from the car and made my way to the elites' warm up area on Cumberland Street. I was surprisingly relaxed all morning, but when I got to Cumberland Street, I became acutely aware of who I'd be starting with. An exception had been made for my inclusion in this wave and for the first time since I collected my number on Friday, I felt the pressure to actually deliver a sub 2:30 performance.

After being ushered to the start line, I met someone whose goal was sub 2:30. This would have done me too, but I was going to chase the time more aggressively than him. With this plan in mind, I stayed in front of him and did my best to assess who else was nearby. I knew who was ahead of me and I didn't want to be impeding anyone who was certain to beat me. At the same time though, based on last year's results and 150 police officers being let squash in after the sub elites, I felt justified in pushing forward a few more places.

**Race**

**Mile Splits: 1) 5:17,** **2) 5:18, 3) 5:38, 4) 5:29, 5) 5:34, Average pace = 3:24/km**

Once the tape was lifted, concerned about being tripped up, I made a break for it. The effort felt about right though and as I wasn't up with the Kenyans or Mick Clohisey, I figured I'd be okay. I didn't want to look at my watch as often as I did last April in Rotterdam, and the first inkling I had of how fast I was running was when the first mile split flashed. This told me I'd completed the opening mile in 5:17. I had looked at a pacing band for a sub 2:30 finish at the expo, which suggested a 6:04 opening mile. I was way ahead of that and figured it was taking congestion at the start into account when making its calculations. It didn't yet feel like I'd been working and the pace I was running felt sustainable.

Only a mile into the race, things were thinning out, but I wasn't yet looking for people to work with. Then Thomas Frazer arrived at my side and asked about my goal time. I tentatively said 2:28, but that'd I'd be happy with anything under 2:30. He was looking for 2:27, which I thought might be just a little too hot. I eased off ever so slightly and he took the lead. We passed Christchurch Cathedral and came to the top of Bridge Street and a fast downhill stretch that would take us onto the quays. I wasn't going to pass up the free gift gravity offers, increased my cadence, retook the lead from Thomas Frazer, and arrived on Usher's Quay having opened up a bit of a gap on him.

The first bit of a climb was coming up the on the far side of the Liffey. It wasn't severe by any means, but it was the first time I began to dwell on the fact I had 26 miles to run today. I was a good bit ahead of myself and I had a decision to make as to whether I should keep pushing or back off a bit and slow down for others with similar goals.

The sensible thing to do might have been to back off, but I was feeling good and the conviction to back myself was a compelling one. With that, I thought just get up this hill, get onto North Circular Road and take it from there. I followed through on this conviction and approaching the gates to the Park, I found myself in a group of four. Thomas Frazer was back alongside me and he asked the other two what their goals were. I didn't catch hear answer, but caught mention of reaching halfway in 72-73 minutes. Assuming they were going for negative splits, as perceived wisdom would have you believe was the only sensible approach to take to Dublin, then they were better runners than I was.

I looked over my shoulder, but couldn't see any other potential allies. It was time for a second big decision and my whole race rested upon this one working out. The choices were either to hang with this group and stick with them for as long as possible, or dial it back in and fall in with a group that were moving at an easier pace. The latter didn't fit in with the modus operandi of backing myself, so I went with the former.

Committed to a fast first half, I gave up on the idea of running negative splits, but should I reach halfway in under 73 minutes, I would have still fancied myself to break 2:30. I'd arranged with someone to hand me a gel in the Park, I just needed to make sure I was on the left hand side of Chesterfield Avenue to grab it off him.

**6) 5:36, 7) 5:39, 8) 5:19, 9) 5:22, 10) 5:20, Average pace = 3:23/km**

I'd consumed a gel just before the start and it felt a bit too soon to be taking another one right now. I ran holding onto the gel for a bit, before telling myself getting calories on board was more important than any brief moment of queasiness swallowing the gel might precipitate. Besides I'd also arranged with my brother to hand me another gel in Castleknock and I needed to test how the first one went down, before I could make a decision on what to do with the one my brother was going to give me. It wasn't a brand I had used before, so it was a bit of an unknown. But I was only going to ingest the gel bit by bit, and if the first bit didn't go down easily, I'd dump it. I had more gels in the pocket of my shorts as back up, and both gels and Lucozade Sport were being given out on the course. With all these things considered, even if I did end up dumping the gel upon first taste, I wasn't worried about running out of fuel. So basically I stopped thinking about it and just swallowed the f\*cking thing.

The group I was part of stayed together all the way along Chesterfield Avenue, and I was happily tucked in at the back. I've ran often enough in the Park to know that the prevailing wind is against you when running towards the Castleknock Gates, as we were now doing. The highest point in the course was also approaching and we had begun the gradual incline to this point. My plan was to stay at the rear of the group for a long as possible and only look to take the lead again when we turned out of the wind at Myo's. However, the runners out front parted and I was let take the lead 100m before exiting the Park. I didn't have much choice but to scrap my plans to shelter behind the others. I knew it was a selfish approach to racing and I couldn't reasonably have expected to get away with it in such a small group. In any event, the wind was much lighter than usual and I wasn't losing too much by being out front.

The four of us exited the Park, passed through Castleknock Village and turned right at Myo's. I knew what was coming and had been biding my time until we hit the highest point of the course in just a few hundred metres. I'd arranged to get a gel off my brother just before the 7 mile marker. It hadn't been too long since I'd consumed the first gel, but my decision this time was just get it into me and keep the energy reserves topped up. The downhill stretches coming up meant my breathing would be a little lighter and I waited until then to consume the gel. I upped the pace as well and opened up a small gap on those I was with, but I wasn't working any harder than I had been and I was merely taking advantage of the gradient.

I got back into the Park ahead of the others and when the group reassembled we had been joined by a hereto unknown runner (who would eventually finish 5 seconds ahead of me), from the U.K. Police Force. Before exiting the Park this time through the Chaplelizod Gates, there was a brief exchange of words about the pace we were running. Someone exclaimed we had been holding around 5:30/mile pace up until now. I didn't want to overthink things today and my plan was to ignore my watch for the entire race, only looking at it when it auto lapped every 1.61km. I ditched the imperial system a long time ago, but from the nine splits that had so far flashed on my Garmin, I knew we were running well under 5:30/mile pace. This was my contribution to the discussion and there were one or two murmurs of agreement.

**11) 5:32, 12) 5:23, 13) 5:26, 14) 5:46, 15) 5:37, Average pace = 3:26/km**

The group was still intact passing through Chapelizod and I was now in unfamiliar territory. I'd thoroughly studied the route though and knew what was in store for us going up St. Laurence's Road. I was happy with how my race had gone to this point and I didn't want to mess anything up by pushing hard just to gain a few seconds running up this hill. But I didn't want to lose too much time either, so "comfortably fast" was my mantra. Our recent recruit from the U.K. Police and I moved to the front, and the groupetto splintered. The policeman seemed determined to lead and I let him at it. I'd pinpoint this as the moment when the race became just about me and nobody else. I was never completely on my own, but after this, I never felt like I was working with anybody.

I'd made tentative arrangements with someone to have them pass me a bottle of electrolyte and a gel at the "11 mile mark on South Circular Road", but it came with the warning that he might not be there. I passed where I thought our " meeting point" might be and hadn't noticed my friend, so I just assumed he hadn't been able to make it. Shortly after this, I had somebody run up alongside me dressed in ordinary street wear and keep pace with me for 10m or so. At first I thought it was just some oddball emerging from an early house, who wanted to highlight the fact I wasn't running all that fast. He then proffered me a drink and it took another couple of seconds for me to realise who it was. The only liquids I had until now we're a few swigs of water at the aid stations and I gratefully accepted the new concoction. I grunted my thanks and forged on.

I reached halfway with bottle still in hand, and crossed the mat with Cillian O' Leary from Raheny Shamrocks, in 1:12:25. Having set a half marathon PB of 1:13:05 in Tullamore 2 months ago, I was happy that however the next 21km went, I was going to finish the day with at least one PB. (Incidentally, Strava is also giving me my best 10km time as well.) Ordinarily, I might have been worried I'd overcooked things, but I'd seen massive improvements since the half marathon in Tullamore and it was just a case of "Keep on trucking."

Although there was still quite a bit left in the bottle I was carrying, I was on the verge of dumping it. I put the bottle to my lips for one final swig and as soon as this happened I noticed how I moved a few strides in front of Cillian O' Leary, whom I had reached halfway with. I thought there must be something magical in the mixture and I decided I'd hold onto it until it was empty. It was only going to get lighter and it was a better rehydrating option than the water or Lucozade being given out at the aid stations.

**16) 5:30, 17) 5:30, 18) 5:31, 19) 5:31, 20) 5:29, Average pace = 3:25/km**

I wasn't as familiar with the roads on the this part of the route, as I had been hitherto. With drink in hand and now battling a lonely furrow to the finish line, my memories of this part of the race aren't as clear. It's mostly one mishmash of crowds, barriers, trees, houses, shops and several of the African runners pulled out on the side of the road. I wasn't 100% sure of where I was until I turned left onto Templeogue Road and ran by Bushy Park. The data tells me I maintained my pace throughout these 5 miles and with liquid always to hand, it took a lot of the stress out of the race. I barely noticed I was holding a bottle to be honest, and at the slow rate I was consuming it, I was pretty sure it was going to last until my second agreed rendezvous with the guy who had handed me the drink at mile 11. The stretch of familiar road ended after only 1 mile, and a distant memory of DCM in 2008, told me a nice sweeping downhill would welcome into Milltown. Memory served me well and the course profile helped me finish off this 5 mile stretch with a 5:29 split. Soon after passing under the bridge in Milltown, I was greeted by the 20 mile sign. There hadn't been too many miles that had taken me longer than 5:30, and I knew I was well target for a 2:28 finishing time.

**21) 5:33, 22) 5:43, 23) 5:40, 24) 5:41, 25) 5:51, Average pace = 3:32/km**

As oft told though, the real race only started now. I felt alright considering I was just after running 20 miles faster than I'd ever ran 20 miles before in my life. It didn't help that the course kicked up right at this point, but a bit of a slowdown ensued. Even if I slowed to 6 minute miles, I was still going to deliver a sub 2:30 race. Safe in this knowledge, I wonder if I became too complacent. Although I wasn't suffering, I couldn't shake the thought that the real suffering might start at any minute. I wouldn't say I was afraid of pushing any harder, but I knew from a long way out, I was going to smash my PB and there was going to be no need to suffer for it. Like I said at the start of the report, 'calm and controlled' were to be my tactics today and while I might have abandoned that approach as soon as the gun went, now seemed like a good time to employ it. It was just a matter of playing it safe and not throwing it all away this close to the finish.

The jaunt up Roebuck Hill was the slowest mile of my race, but I got there without the heartbreak. It helped that I knew a friend would be waiting for me, at the top of Foster's Avenue, with a bottle of flat Coke. This has often been my elixir in Ironman marathons and I was hoping it would have a similar effect today. They were as good as their word and were at mile 22 as promised. It was only here I dropped the still not empty bottle of electrolyte I'd been given me an hour earlier. I'd also asked my friend to attach a Nurofen to the bottle, which he hadn't forgotten. I didn't think I needed the Nurofen, but as insurance against cramping, I took it regardless. The Coke didn't have the magic effect I was hoping for, but at least it was tastier than the electrolyte solution I had been supping for the previous 9 miles.

The fact it was essentially all downhill from here made things easier. The flyover at UCD was soon upon me. I'd been building it up my head as a potential banana skin. As it turned out, I barely noticed it, and once across, I tried to take advantage of the downhill stretch on the far side. My pace naturally picked up with the favourable gradient, but once the ground levelled out, the wind became noticeable for the first time all race. It was probably the case that fatigue was simply setting in and the strength of the headwind was only in my imagination. I witnessed a few ahead of me turning onto Nutley Lane and decided I'd wait until I made the same turn, to have another go at injecting some pace into proceedings. When I got there, nothing really happened. I'd started looking at my watch by now and my non-changing pace confirmed this. At the same time though, I hadn't experienced a spectacular blow-up, and I was still moving forward painlessly.

**26) 5:49, 27) 0.67km in 2:21, 3:35/km**

Although my mile splits were gone out to 5:40 and above, with so much time banked in the first 20 miles, I wasn't in any danger of missing my target. I forgot about finishing strongly and settled for a nice comfortable run in. It made for a relaxed finish, but I wonder could I have gotten more out of the race had I put more pressure on myself. I was getting closer to the finish and once past the RDS, I deemed it safe enough to dump the bottle of Coke I'd been carrying since mile 22. The crowds were building and it wasn't long before the finishing gantry came into view. I took one final look at my watch, which confirmed what I already knew, that I was going to comfortably finish under 2:28. There was no need for a sprint finish and once I could make out the time on the clock, I could see I was in a sort of no man's land where there was no extra incentive to dig deep. Don't get me wrong, I was delighted with the time and if anything it made for an enjoyable final few hundred metres.

**Reflection**

I duly crossed the line in a time of 2:26:21 and after the finisher's medal was placed around my neck, I allowed myself a few discrete first pumps. It was the first time in over 2 years, I was truly happy crossing a finish line. Although I'd been concentrating on triathlon in the intervening period, 4½ years was a long time to be stuck with a PB. Bettering my time from Connemarathon 2014 was my ultimate goal at the start of the year. It took a little longer than planned, so to improve upon my previous best time by 9 minutes and 30 seconds is very pleasing. And now that the goal has been achieved, I can happily sign off on this chapter in my running adventures. Much wants more and part of me wonders by how much I could improve upon my new PB, but it's back to Ironman training, hopefully culminating with a return to Kona in 2019.

