

Bar A Half Marathon

Thirty-five thousand runners. Over 2 million spectators. Thousands of volunteers who manned water stops and handed out goody bags at the expo. Numerous local police to direct both traffic and runners. National TV coverage. Helicopters flying overhead. Kenyans galore. Age group awards that went 10 deep. Framed finishing certificates. Mile markers and clocks. Champion chips. Official photos. The mayor igniting the starting cannon. Results on-line before you even get home afterwards. Race numbers signed by internationally famous road racers and former winners of the event.

The annual Bar A Half Marathon from South Belmar to Long Branch was characterized by **none** of the above. A gang of us - Dennis, Colin, Andrew, John, Beverly, and myself - had been encouraged to run this obscure event after a suggestion by running colleague Wes, who somehow confused December 13th with April 1st. Before the start, we met up with Jim, who is on our e-mail list, but who we haven't seen for a while.

When we got to the bar a half-hour before the start, we discovered that the "organizer" hadn't yet arrived. That's when we found out that the organizer was Doctor T-Shirt. It's virtually impossible to describe him, but believe me when I tell you that if you ever see Dr T-Shirt and his car, you will never forget him and his colorful hearse. We heard from some of the others in the bar that they were expecting a record field this year - perhaps as many as 50 participants! We all looked around at each other and that's when we realized that we were in for an unusual race experience. There was one copy of the race course from Map Quest that we were instructed to study before leaving the bar. Dr T-Shirt finally arrived, and that meant we finally got our shirts. Questions about chip timing resulted in guffaws all around. Chips? Hell; there were no numbers! And there would be no clocks on the course (s), no mile markers, in fact no clock at the end, assuming you could actually find the finish, and most of us never saw a water stop. However, to be fair, it's believed that no two participants actually ran the same course or distance.

To say that the race budget was tight is putting it mildly. There wasn't even a chalk mark across the road in the Bar A parking lot to indicate the start line. Instead, we used cracks in the pavement. Once the official photo was taken (by a bystander who simply came to spend the afternoon getting plastered in the bar), we were off once Dr T-Shirt said the word "go". There were absolutely no course markings, and we ran through some of the best and worst of the Jersey Shore towns - mansions in Deal to slums and dilapidated buildings and strange smells in Asbury Park. Personally, I decided early on that the best strategy was to stay within shouting distance of Jim, as he is a veteran of the Jersey Shore running community and had actually done this event a few times. WRONG! After 9, 10, or 11 miles, it became apparent to me that he had no more idea about the course layout than I did, and since I couldn't see anybody in front of us and nobody behind, and Jim talked about stopping at President's Park, as he calculated that would be just about 13 miles, I knew we were in trouble. I had recalled some bar talk before the race that you had to run to this park, and then run back for a few miles to some windmill and that would bring you to the "finish line"; i.e., Celtic Cottage Bar in Long Branch. It turns out that the race course varies every year, presumably based on which bars are scheduled to be open.

Apparently most of the runners were just as lost as Jim and I, but couldn't exactly ask for directions from either race officials or even spectators, as by now you must have realized that none of either were present. I believe that some people kept running north until they finally ran into the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and realized that perhaps they have gone too far north. There was nobody to tell you when to turn around! Did I forget to mention that it was damn bloody cold and we ran into a 15 mph headwind coming from the north. At any rate, after an indeterminate distance, most of us turned around a few miles north of the windmill (it turns out there are 3 windmills, so take your pick) and headed back. We finally got to Ocean Ave and the windmill and I see Dr T-Shirt, so I picked up the pace to kick it in for the finish. I see John laying into Dr T and then yelled out a question about where the actual finish line was. Unfortunately, it wasn't there, as I needed to run another block west, then turn right, and I should eventually see the Celtic Cottage. Off I went, made the turns, and stopped my watch at the front door of said establishment. There was not another person in sight. No finish line, no finishing places, no chip mat (ha), nothing. I went inside to the smoky bar and found the half dozen or so runners who had finished ahead of me and who hadn't gotten lost. Doesn't mean we all ran the same course mind you, but at least some of us made it back. Of course, the van with the warm clothes didn't show up for at least another half hour.

Refreshments? Well; there wasn't any water and eventually they brought out a few sandwiches, and if you had carried money, you could always buy a beer (thanks Dennis).

It appeared that approximately 25 or 30 of the brave souls of around 40 who started actually found the finish line. There will be no official (or unofficial for that matter) results posted on the web, so for what it's worth, here are the approximate finishing times for the Hill Runners of Hunterdon. Incidentally, all seven of us won our age divisions. That may or may not be true, but who is to dispute it as there were and will be no results. Jim claims that we ran at least 14 miles, but I can't speak for the others. We subsequently discovered that the "A" in Bar A officially stands for Anticipation, although it's clear that this event is really the Bar "Approximate" Half-marathon.

Colin - 1:43:13 7th overall

Andrew - 1:44:xx 9th overall

Bruce - 1:48:35 10th overall

John - 1:49:xx 11th finisher, but distance unknown

Jim - 1:49:xx 12th

Dennis - 1:50:58 13th

Beverly - 2:13:xx still there waiting for her age group trophy.

A memorable race that will not soon be forgotten. Incidentally, fabulous t-shirts, but you wouldn't expect anything less from Dr T-Shirt. By now, everyone will be so enthusiastic that we will have to rent a couple of buses for all of the Hill Runners who will join us next year. The course is guaranteed to be different.

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