

The Hartford Marathon Experience ‘06 – Hello Sun, It’s so Nice to Seeya!

How different was the experience this year at the Hartford Marathon from last year? How about a polar difference? Night and day? One end of the weather spectrum to the other? In other words the Hartford ‘06 experience simply could not have been more profoundly different from last year’s experience than if Hollywood had been called in to create a set that contained every element to create the absolute perfect marathon experience. Start with the temperature at a nicely brisk and bracing 40 degrees or so, coupled with the fact that there was not a cloud in the sky. Then add a beautiful sunrise, the first rays of light beaming upon the gathering multitude of runners bringing with them a hint of warmth. Finally, mix in a most efficiently run city-wide effort by the citizens of Hartford to make the ‘06 marathon the most memorable event yet and there you have your ideal setting.

Now, I have sometimes characterized myself as the “reluctant marathoner” simply on account of the massive amount of time and effort to run these things and the commitment required to get to the starting line. And some of you are aware of my penchant for waiting until the last minute to finally make this commitment, sometimes almost to the last second. And then there are always the evasive answers as to the pace that I am planning to run. Lastly there was my report from Hartford last year about the total “crapiness” as the rain pummeled us from start to finish. Anyway, I slightly digress.

I had only a relative time frame for completion (thinking 4:30s) for the day as I set out at a “leisurely” 10 minutes per mile. I had decided for this day I wanted to experience simply “the joy” of running that comes after all the weeks of training that puts you into the kind of physical shape that combines all the elements of the physical, the mental and last but not least the metaphysical. As I moved along I engaged my fellow marathoners in conversation in the number one topic for the day - the utter superb-ness of the weather. Magnificent! Sparkling! Clarity in the air! The runners were ebullient, the crowds the friendliest, the groups playing music, the liveliest and all the colors on the trees seemingly the most beautiful.

Well, long about mile five or six I was talking to a runner about what a difference it was between last year and this year and how hard it had rained etc. and I made the comparison to “cow p...ing on a flat rock.” I was sort of doing my Minnesota farm boy routine when next to me I heard a laugh and looked over to see the most Irish woman there ever was running next to me. Well, I immediately learned her name – Maria – and the fact that this was her first marathon and that she was running for her mother who was a breast cancer survivor and for whom she had raised money to give to a cancer non-profit in her mother’s name. Anyway, for the next mile or two I talked a blue streak using “rogueish” good humor to make her laugh. We high-fived a couple of times and when she smiled her Irish smile, well, I was hooked. Since we were running at the same relative pace I figured, well, why not continue my raconteur ways. I learned she worked for a pharmacy company (many in our club can relate). I learned her other interests included dancing (club members know my reputation for “cutting the rug”), singing (well, okay, I can only carry a tune if it has handles but she had worked in various Broadway productions in her

younger years) and she was a leader of Spinning groups. Oh, and did I mention she was going to celebrate her 25th wedding anniversary next August?

Well, the miles ticked by as we continued to find common interests to discuss. Of course, me with my all of three marathons tucked under my belt discussed in “wise manner” how there are really two parts to a marathon. Part one is the first 20 miles and part two is the last 6.2 miles and how the race really begins at that second point. Now this was mentioned in the early phase of the race and as all you veterans know there is sometimes this wall that you smack into at mile 20 that just runs you off the road.

In any case, long about mile 17 or so I noticed that she was beginning to slow a bit and then to walk, power walk, but walk, first, just up the hills. Well, by this point, since we had become “fast” friends, I chose to stay and walk with her. She said all the usual things about going on, etc, but I told her not to sweat it, that there was a whole contingency of runners known as Gallowaytians who believed in walking as an integral part of running a marathon and she was right in sync with them. She said she would catch up later but again, you all know that just ain’t gonna happen. So I stayed. Besides I had been going on all day about joy and experiencing it with every step taken, etc, etc, and that time had no meaning, etc, etc. So it just seemed like the natural thing to do was put my money where my mouth was - so to speak.

By mile 20 the fatigue and wear had kicked in big time not to mention cramps in the hamstrings (dare I say, at this point, that I was called upon for my message skills, well, I trust you will all keep that one under your hat). We walked up Asylum Hill to start the six mile loop through the neighborhood and things continued to worsen as she began walking more and more. I told her that as much as she wanted to walk that we really had to also maintain forward momentum which included running. In order to that I proposed that as we reached each mile marker after 20 that we would walk for a period but then would run until we saw the next mile marker as a short term goal. As we were going through the neighborhood I would tell her where we would be turning next and where the markers should be and that between 22 and 23 would be this turnaround and that once we had made this turnaround and made it to mile 23 it was truly “the beginning of the end.”

Well, by mile 23 her energy was seriously flagging, we made it to mile 24 but it was a struggle. I urged her on with the incentive that no more than a half a mile or so was the turn that we would be making to head back to Bushnell Park, and from there it was a straight shot, downhill, before turning into to the park to the finish line. By this time all systems were in the red zone. My strategy then was to begin counting down the minutes left to run. I stared with 15 minutes. I think we doing 12 or 13 minute miles by that time so technically it was not quite accurate but I felt under the circumstances a little lie or two wasn’t going to make too much of a difference in the scheme of matters.

By mile 25 all she wanted to do was walk and that’s when I hauled out the heavy motivational artillery. I told her that in her spinning classes she would never let anyone quit, that all were expected to make the final efforts to complete the class and that is what she had to do now. Because of our conversations I could tell she had always been a goal-

driven person who accomplished them. I reminded her, quite forcefully, I may add, about the fact that she had never quit at anything in her life (from our earlier conversations, again, I felt pretty safe about saying that) and that she was not about to quit now, particularly since she was so close to accomplishing another goal. I also reminded her that all her running club friends (she had pointed them out and introduced them to me as we ran) her husband (he took pictures of us running together), her son (but he wasn't there that day) - and her mother - were expecting her to complete this marathon. And she wasn't about to let them down, at least "not on my watch."

That last part about completing the marathon for her mother is what made her go down and find those tiny trace amounts of reserves left in the tank to make it across the finish line. What also helped was that we were running downhill and could finally see where the other runners were making the turn (I was continually pointing that out) to go back into the park to the finish line. This turn is just past the overpass, as you are coming down Asylum Hill and nearing the end of mile 25 and when you make that turn it seems as if by magic, the finish line appears. I told her she absolutely had to smile for the camera as she crossed the finish line, no pained looks of agony allowed.

So, indeed, what a difference a year does makes. Last year, nothin' but rain, this year nothin' but sun. And the "joy thing"...hey, it's out there.