

Steamtown 2007 by Joe Galioto

The Steamtown Marathon was scheduled for approximately 5 weeks prior to my second goal race for 2007 – the JFK 50 Miler. I was already entered in the Ramapo Mountain Madness 50k Trail Race the following weekend so I really didn't need another fully supported long run at this point but ... Steamtown's statistics sounded so attractive. It has a net elevation decline of 955 feet and boasts the fastest median finishing time of any US marathon with at least 750 finishers (2005) - by all measures, it's a fast course.

Running Steamtown in addition to Ramapo wasn't going to hurt my JFK preparation, I reasoned. In fact, I further rationalized, two long weekends in a row could actually help make me stronger. The truth is I was seduced by Steamtown's statistics. I was running so much stronger than I was in May when I made my marathon debut at Pocono (4:11) and I thought I could break 4 hours at Steamtown. So, I went for it.

But wouldn't you know it, there would be other forces in play that day. Who would have predicted that this year's Steamtown Marathon would become known as the "Steamytown Marathon?" Temperatures reached into the high 70's with humidity levels in the 80's. It was the primary conversation on everyone's lips.

There were several of us HRH runners doing Steamtown and I managed to find Dan Sullivan and Mike Humphrey on the starting line, which was great because we were able to keep each other calm and amused with conversation and sly comments about everything. We agreed to stay together if our pace dictated it. The cannon sounded an absolutely thunderous noise and we were off.

Most of the races I have done in the last few years are really small with participation levels around 300 or much less. I have to admit, I really am not used to – nor comfortable with - running with a crowd of people around me. I found myself running at a quick pace, trying to pass people who were uncomfortable running down this steep hill and eventually settled behind a few runners in the center of the road. As I looked around, I realized that I lost sight of Dan and Mike – so much for staying together.

As I am running along Main Street, only 1 or so miles into the race, the runner immediately in front of me takes a tumble, knocking down another runner as well. Apparently, he was running along the painted lane divider and didn't see the bright orange cones that were placed all along this divider and tripped right over them. Stuff like this makes me nervous and so, after helping him up and ensuring he was okay, I promptly moved to the far left side of the road and found a place with few runners around me.

About another mile up the road, Mike found me and we proceeded to exchange a few stories as we then flip-flopped the next 8 or 9 miles. Mike would get a few hundred feet ahead of me and then I would catch up, say hello, and then get a few hundred feet ahead of Mike, then he would catch up, say hello, and on we would go like this. It's funny though because we rarely stayed side-by-side. Rather, I was on the right side and Mike was all the way across the road on the left. I guess we ended up this way because he was taking water from the first two aid stations whereas I was relying on the water I carried with me. Whenever we wanted to exchange a thought, we looked over at one another and made our way to the center of the road. "Hey Joe, what's that pink drink in your water bottle?" "Raspberry GU20, Mike," and then separate to our respective sides again.

Somewhere around mile 3, Mike commented that we were going a little fast as our split was 26 and change, but I don't think either of us cared too much as we were running down a long, gradual downhill – the place where most of the course's elevation decline occurs – and neither of us slowed down too much either.

As we entered town again, around mile 10, a marching band was playing and many people lined the streets screaming and egging us on. I got all excited and picked up my pace a little bit. Once the sounds of the marching band were out of earshot, I made a realization to myself: I am very hot! While I was drinking from my bottle and grabbing water at the aid stations, I wasn't cooling down. In fact, my shirt was drenched and the sweat on my body was not evaporating. It was at this point that I told myself to slow down and adapt to the conditions. Mike passed me again, said hello and cheered me on. I cheered him on as well and wished him well for he was looking terrific and I was not.

I kept moving along, enjoying the course and talking to different people, listening to their stories and sharing some of my own. This was enjoyable and kept me going. By the time I reached the trail section at mile 15, I was feeling much better. I had since soaked a bandana with water and tied it around my neck, using the coolness of the water to cool me down. At mile 18, I heard Mike scream my name; the course makes a loop around a soccer field and he was on his way out as I was on my way in. Hearing the enthusiasm in his voice was a great pick-me-up, and I was glad that he was still having a great afternoon.

After exiting the soccer field, you run a mile on wood chips. I was fond of this section, though I heard many people cursing about the soft, uneven surface (I guess once a trail runner, always a trail runner). My energy levels were on their way up at this point. The next five miles were uneventful, and probably the ugliest part of this very beautiful course. It was hard to find motivation running across railroad tracks and through an industrial park, but I found solace in the fact that I was finally comfortable. But that feeling didn't last too long...

At mile 24, I was back in the neighborhoods and enjoying the enthusiasm of the people. Some had stereos blasting from their porches, others were giving out water and still others hung up garden hoses, providing a cooling mist to anyone who wanted to run through it. And while all this crowd enthusiasm was energizing me, I quickly became sapped when I hit the last big hill. I looked at my watch, did some quick calculations and realized that sub-4 hours was now out of the picture.

In a way, this realization released some self-imposed pressure. I could no longer break 4 hours, but at least I could try to set a PR. I decided to throw caution to the wind and run harder the last 2 miles. When I reached the final straightway, I could see the finish line about $\frac{3}{4}$ a mile away. I kept picking up my pace knowing that with just a little faster finish I could salvage the day and get a PR. I crossed the finish line in 4:09 – a near 2 minute PR!

I was happy with the results. While I didn't break 4 hours, I did finish the race and was neither tired or sore. I'm starting to like the marathon and know that I still have plenty of room for improvement. I wish I could blame my time entirely on the weather but in reality I probably didn't run that smart of a race. I have to learn to harness my enthusiasm and not change pace just because I like the marching band.

Dan and I joked afterwards that "we were just running today as a warm up for next week's 50k," which we are running together. Of course, had we smashed the 4-hour barrier, the story would have been different.