

Melbourne Marathon 2014 – Racer's Report

This is the first time I haven't really felt the urge to get right onto writing a race report which probably tells you a fair bit about how pear shaped it went. I was expecting it to be a 2 pager when I started but gosh darn it even when I have a bad race I like talking about myself :-)

Background

I've been pretty open about my form being up and down like a yoyo in the leadup to MM this year. My main method of tracking my form was comparing this year with how I went in the leadup to the 2012 Melbourne Marathon in which I ran 3:04:37.

Basically I needed to be confident that I was in about 5 minutes better shape than I was in 2012. If I didn't feel I was in shape to have a realistic crack at sub 3 then I was not going to enter.

The Good:

- Albert Park 10k (39:12 after being held up significantly in the first 1km) and winning the MMM Killer Loop Handicap a few days later (a 5k hilly loop not suited to those of us big boned runners)
- Some good training sessions, 6 x 30k+ runs, 2 with Parkrun / Tan races in the middle in which I went within seconds of PBs, and a 3 x 3k session around the Tan with GG which went far better than either of us expected.
- Averaged about 62km per week, up from 49km per week in 2012.

The Bad:

- Constant low level colds and one ripper which had me in bed for a week. Many of my leadup races were impacted by these.
- Burnley Half Marathon (1:27:27 – 2 mins slower than 2012), unable to break Tan PB or 5k PB, despite being consistently around the mark.
- The other training sessions, 2 weeks out from race day I pulled up midway through the TILT100 (100 minute tempo session) after struggling from the start. This was a session that I had smashed in the leadup to 2012.
- Hamstring tightness early in campaign, especially late in long runs and during any shorter reps.

All in all I felt that my training was there, I had done the extra kms and long runs, but I just hadn't had the results to confirm my perception.

Having in the past been a bad offender of overestimating my ability based on rose coloured viewings of previous performances, I was hesitant to assume I was in better form than my recent races.

And my recent races were not good.

At the top of my taper (18 days out) I compared 2012 and 2014 and couldn't find a way to justify that I was in sub 3 shape. I didn't want to make a rash decision so I arranged to catch up with Dozer (the poor guy I usually use as my sounding board) over lunch and put it to him and he came to a similar conclusion.

So I pulled the pin and immediately felt a massive weight come off my shoulders. I didn't realise how much this had been sitting on my mind until that point.

I received a LOT of feedback from people generally ranging from curiosity as to what was going on, to encouraging me to get back on board, to calling me soft (or words to that effect). I had expected to cop a bit, if the shoe was on the other foot I'd have done the same, but with so many others still running I thought my withdrawal would largely go under the radar so the volume caught me by surprise.

Anonymous forum sledges from pacing hacks aside, I was very comfortable with my decision and had no doubt in my mind that not running was the right call for me.

I put my hand up to carry drinks for GG and Rafa (2 of my 3 Oxfam team mates) who were aiming for 3:0X. Xmas (the other Oxfam team mate) was selfishly targeting a faster time so I gave him nothing :-)

With the pressure of racing off I took the opportunity to enjoy a few dinners with friends, including one the Friday a week before MM. Having had a few drinks the night before I rolled up to my first Point Cook Parkrun with fairly low expectations the next morning. Before the race I explained to some Hobos friends that I was out and why, then I surprised myself with 2nd place in 18:22 for a 12s PB on an undulating course. In fact I should have done my report on that race, I was really happy with that result!

And just like that I was back in. I had been confident of my training but just hadn't had a result to back it up so this result gave me confidence that I was in shape to shoot for sub 3. Running calculators indicated 18:22 = mid 2:56 which I took with a grain of salt, but it was enough to give me confidence of sub 3.

In hindsight, despite the soap opera feel to it all, I still think pulling out two weeks beforehand was the right call based on the information I had at hand, and jumping back in after the Parkrun result was also the right decision. However the Hobos folks may have been somewhat bemused with only 5 hours separating my explanation that I was out to announcing my return :-)

Leadup

So with a week to go I got down to arranging logistics. Thankfully Simo was co-ordinating drinks with military precision so Rafa and GG were quickly looked after by others and Alex (my brother) jumped in to carry my drinks for me.

There was a Friday lunch catchup where most of the runners and support crew met up for final drinks handovers and a chat. I was feeling pretty good and freely talked about my race plan which was pretty simple, aim for 4:10 – 4:15 pace and if I felt good at the top of the Tan (~37km) then I could think about pushing on but not before then.

- Planned result – 2:58
- Best conceivable result – 2:57
- Likely result – 2:59 (basically 4:12.5 pace with a few slower kms at Fitzroy Street and up the Tan)
- Worst case scenario – wheels wobble along St Kilda Road and I know sub 3 is gone but I consolidate for a PB (sub 3:04:37)

I guess we can all have a chuckle now, it's fair to say 3:24 was nowhere on my radar (nor Mr Motivator's) :-)

Pre-Race

Mrs Racer was coming in with some friends and bikes to cheer and take pictures, and Alex was riding his bike in to meet the other MMM support crew, so I was able to drive myself in which I found really relaxing. Parked in my super secret free carpark in Southbank that no-one knows about at 6:15 and walked over to the Tan.

Volunteers were setting up the 35km and 39km drink stations and there was a conveniently located bank of portaloos. I jogged about 1km down to the Swan Street Bridge where there were more portaloos.

In fact, I don't know whether it was just me but it seemed that there were more loos and shorter lines this year so kudos to the organisers.

Having been caught out in 2012 I was keen to get right to the front of the starting area to avoid traffic. I was surprised at how empty it was and at the lack of familiar faces. Having arrived at 6:30 I had assumed everyone else would be there already. People started showing up in dribs and drabs and I remembered that most of the Milers had scored themselves preferred starts so didn't need to arrive early and fight the riff raff (me).

House and Danger (the 3 hour pacers) arrived and I attached myself to them like stink on cheese. House had been battling some injury concerns and had spend a chunk of the week sick so until I saw him I wasn't 100% sure he would make it to the start line so it was good to see him there. By this stage there were about 8 red shirts grouped together, and we could see the other guys in the preferred start area.

I also saw a mate from Hobos (Andrew) who I knew was planning to run off very little training and I thought he looked very cheerful for someone probably about to have a very tough day at the office.

Oh the irony :-)

Race

And we're off. For the first few kms I basically just tried to follow the pacers and not worry about my watch. Halfway down St Kilda Road I realised that by sticking with the 3 hour group I wasn't going to get clear air as there was a cluster of what must have been 50 runners.

I tried a few things, moving to the side of the pack, dropping to the back of the pack, sitting at the front, every option seemed to involve a fair amount of working to maintain space around me.

Before the race I had set myself to run with the pack. I didn't want to drop off the back or go ahead as I knew they would be very close to my target pace, but the congestion was really killing me so I pushed off the front as we were running around Albert Park Lake.

Went past the 7km drinks crew, grabbed a bottle from Alex and dropped my gel. Decided on the spur of the moment that it was moderately warm and I didn't like the idea of a gel but I let him sprint back up to me with it before sharing that information with him :-)

I was thinking to myself that I was definitely feeling better than I did in 2012. Everything was ticking over quite comfortably although I was conscious that it was not cold which meant that very soon it would be warm.

Went past the 3 amigos with smiles and thumbs up, I haven't reviewed the cameras yet but I hope they got a lot of good photos there because photos of me looking comfortable and smiling will be in short supply!

Somewhere between there and Fitzroy Street I became aware that my right hamstring felt a bit tight. I'd had some problems early in my campaign but thought I'd got on top of it with some stretches and strengthening exercises so wasn't happy to see it back. It wasn't causing me any problems so I did all I could which was hope it went away.

As I started down Fitzroy Street the downhill was a very welcome respite and I realised I was working harder than I should have been at this pace and I actually felt pretty flat. I recalled El Presidente sent out an e-mail to all the runners which covered a bunch of race day strategy and tactics including references to enjoying the first half and something about floating on air.

It occurred to me that at no stage had I felt like I'd been floating on air. Where was my damn air, Slips!

2nd drink pickup at about 15km and headed up Beaconsfield Parade. About here it occurred to me that none of the other guys targeting 3 hours had come forward with me. I went past LG and Hutz and thought to myself that I needed to make it a lot further to make sure the pink slipper didn't find its way back into my possession. This shocked me as that the thought of stepping off hadn't even occurred to me and my plan was no matter what I would finish, even if I had to walk. That shocked me as who said anything about walking?!?!

Think of all these little titbits as pieces of the puzzle warning me that all was not as it should be...

Running in the shade was nice, but it was noticeably warmer in the open. I banished the weather to the 'nothing I can do about it' basket so other than a vague awareness I didn't really think about it.

I turned around at the top of Beaconsfield Parade (~18km?) and by this stage I was knew that it felt harder than it should and the hamstring was getting tighter and the calf was tightening too. Plus I just felt flat, my legs had no bounce in them. My only thought was that something could click and come good for me which was possible as often on my longer training runs it was 60 – 75 minutes before I'd really start to feel good.

In any case the plan was sub 3 or bust and I was bang on my splits so there was no thought of easing off to conserve energy. I went through halfway in exactly 89 minutes as planned, and Mrs Racer assured me that I looked great. Again, yet to review photos but I felt like crap so I remain to be convinced!

I collected my next drink shortly afterwards and by this stage my leg was causing me to alter my stride slightly and I was working pretty hard to maintain 4:15 pace. GG went past me with a few words and I tried to latch on but a few hundred meters was all I managed.

Somewhere at about 23k – 24k the 3 hour bus went past and House called out some encouragement but it was all bad by then, I knew it was not going to be a good day.

I set myself to back off and consolidate to about 4:30 pace. In 2012 when it went bad I was still able to eke out 4:30 pace for most of the last 10km so it didn't occur to me that I might not be able to do the same here. Near the bottom turnaround point I passed a few Milers including PM who reminded me that Mrs PM was running and oh crap the jokes were no longer jokes and she was going to hand me my arse!

4:30 pace lasted 3km and I collected my drink from Alex at about 28km who by this stage must have been wondering exactly what was going on. I pulled back to a survival shuffle and shortly after walked for the first time.

Alex came along side me on his bike and we spoke for a while and got me shuffling again. At this point all I really knew was everything was stuffed and was working through my options. Given I wasn't stepping off my options were to saddle up for a long walk/run so that's what I did.

As I was walk shuffling along both my calves were tightening and my right hamstring was very tight so I couldn't even remotely stride out. It's fair to say I was pretty unhappy with how the day was turning out and thoughts of 4:XX were flashing through my mind!

A massive thanks to Alex along here as talking with him helped me break into shuffling a few times. The new plan became to shuffle until the calves gave up then walk for a while. Repeat.

Alex head off ahead and somewhere between there and Vic Barracks I got my head in a better place. I've joked about it with a lot of people but it really was a nice day for a walk :-)

I went past the 3 amigos and stopped to give Mrs Racer a hug on the way through but she thought I was trying to step off and gave me absolutely nothing as she booted me back onto the course!

From that point on it was just walk shuffle and enjoy the atmosphere. Rafa cruised past looking solid (recurring theme) followed by the 3:10 bus somewhere along St Kilda Road, and the 3:20 bus with Bacchus somewhere up the Tan. Kms 31 – 40 were my slowest in just over an hour, but once I reached the top of the Tan I managed to shuffle the last 3k to the finish line in 3:24:12.

It was final insult to injury that in the finishing straight some guy ran along carrying his child put distance into me. The silver lining (only revealed later) was that I'd managed to hold off Mrs PM by 7s, another 20 meters and she'd have had me for sure!

Wrap Up

Well that was something else.

I don't know what went wrong. It wasn't the weather as plenty of other people ran blinders on the day, and anyway I was pretty much finished running by about 8:30 :-)

I hit the splits as planned and went through halfway on target so I didn't go out too hard. Nope, it's clear to me that I did everything right and it's the damn race that's broken!

The more I hear other peoples' stories the more I come to realise that the Marathon, despite your best efforts, will sometimes chew you up and spit you out without warning.

I'm disappointed I didn't break 3 hours, I really did feel like I was in shape to do so. It was an entirely different experience to 2012, and probably makes me appreciate that 2012 was a better result for me than I realised.

Regardless, I still enjoyed the day. In fact I had enough time over the latter stages of the course to think over things that I was in a really good mood by the time I crossed the line. It was fantastic to speak with a bunch of Milers immediately afterwards, most of whom had run good or great races.

It was also great to hear about a few others later. Congratulations to Pozza on getting under 4 hours and David in 4:40 on one leg, both on debut. And Robyn for who knows how many marathons overall, but her 10th Melbourne Marathon and first as a Spartan.

Most importantly thanks for all the support, both leading up and on the day. To the Milers and Hobos who both helped me with advice and training and general support. To Simo for being the support crew organiser at large, it's great when someone takes on that responsibility and was aspect I didn't need to worry about in the leadup.

Thanks to all the support out on course, it seemed like a wall of red for large sections of the race. Thanks to Alex for carrying my drinks and nudging me when the wheels came off, and to Marty, Kim and Kris for ensuring the support volume remained constant even when the pace died in the arse :-)

And thanks to Mum for looking after the kids so the others were free to help me.

I'm a very slow learner, sub 3 in 2015!