

Sitting here at sunny Perth airport with flight delayed due to storms in Melbourne. Oh how tempting to stay a while longer. Ah well, gives me a chance to punch out a few reflections.

Why Rotto? I've been here a couple of times for reasons other than running and on one occasion saw a sign advertising the event. It stuck in my mind as something that would be great to do one day so I looked into a bit. This little tale saw it plonked firmly on my bucket list:

Legend has it that Harry McFordyce, an immigrant prisoner on Rottnest Island some 70 years ago escaped the hands of justice and attempted to run off the island. On the fourth leg around the island McFordyce succumbed to dehydration and died. Those running the marathon will see and hear the ghost of Harry playing his bagpipes throughout the race. On the last lap at the foot of Harry's Hill, runners are given a gold coin, which must be carried up the hill and deposited at the feet of the Piper. Legend says failure to do this will result in cramps, dehydration and a possible DNF imposed on the runner by the ghost of Harry.

The planets just kind of lined up for it to happen this year. Originally I was just going along for the fun of it and had no intention of pushing for a result of any relevance, however the running gods decided to give me a reasonably injury free patch of training and so by race day I was thinking I might be in with a chance of running the 2:45ish that would be pretty competitive in a small field.

From my research of the course I was expecting something undulating and a fair chance of some challenging head winds across the barren salt lakes that sit on the outskirts of 'town'. Hopefully the 6am start would preclude the WA heat being a factor, although last year it nudged through the high 20's by the finish.

The course is a 4km loop south of the island's small township, then 4 x 9.5km loops around the northern part of the island.

Stacey and I had decided to make a bit of a trip out of it, so it was great to catch up with friends Emma & Duncan a few days earlier. For the newer Milers, Em and Duncan are pretty accomplished triathletes with 3 Kona ironman finishes between them, Em trained with the Milers for a good while before they relocated to Perth 18 months ago. Spent a night with them before we headed out of town for a couple of days R&R, then met up again with them on Rotto on Saturday. Totally awesome to have a personal 3 person support crew on hand for what was otherwise likely to be a lonely run.

My thoughts on the start line were a bit muddled. I was fit, healthy and pretty much injury free – a rare feat for me. On the flip side it had been 18 months since I had run a road marathon, 30 months since I had achieved a decent result, and my motivation (ie: self discipline) ain't what it used to be so some of the important 1%'ers (eg: nightly core work and stretching) that I attribute my best results to are no longer a regular part of my routine.

The plan was to head out at approx 3:55 pace, though not be ruled by my watch. If I had the opportunity, I was more interested in a podium finish than in chasing a specific time.

The very well organised event got away right on time to the stirring sounds of the bagpipers as the countdown clock hit zero. Immediately the defending champ was off the front and I settled comfortably in 2nd. I was a little surprised as my research on some of the other runners had me thinking there would be a few early trail blazers. I hit 3:55 smack on for the first km and felt fantastically comfortable with the pace.

The 2km mark presents the only u-turn for the entire course. By the time we get there we'd run up a slight gradient for 500m which was already enough to spread the 170 field out. As we headed back into town Em and Duncan were on their bikes and enjoying a laugh to help settle me down. By the time we were back in town Duncan was indicating it looked like I need only be concerned with the one in front and the one behind.

It was a beautiful morning for running. Slightly overcast, 17 degrees. I doubt you could get better than this at this location. As we head across the salt lakes for the first time though we are greeted with a fairly stiff breeze right into our faces. I'm probably 100m behind the leader and can't hear anyone behind me, so there's nowhere to hide from it. Approx 600m to get across the lake where there is good news and bad news waiting. The good news is that the wind fades once you get across, the bad news is that it's Forbes Hill providing the protection - probably 1km to get to the top of the day's biggest rise.

A series of smaller undulations then takes you through some incredibly picturesque areas before arriving at Harry's Hill where the legendary bagpipers announce your arrival. My pace had increased and there were several 3:4x's coming out, but I was feeling really comfortable and happy to go with it to keep the leader in sight and 3rd place under pressure.

A couple more longish rises have me thinking this course is going to present its challenges, but you forget all that when you arrive a Geordie Bay. Wow, that's a view I won't forget in a hurry and I was looking forward to returning 3 more times before breakfast.

A different causeway takes you back across the salt lakes and into town. Unfortunately this approach has more protection from the surrounding hills so you don't get the full benefit of the prospective tailwind. Back into town after 14kms, past the small crowd and well informed commentators (repeated after a 1km loop of the town), feeling fantastic and in a happy place.

Em and Duncan had been doing an awesome job with morale and drink support on the course on their bikes. Stacey was positioned in town so it was great to see her and exchange comforting smiles and words of encouragement. Given I was in the hunt for a place, and as per race rules, all were careful to only pass me things at the official drink stations and otherwise stay far enough away so as not to be accused of pacing.

To date I had declined Duncan's offer to provide me regular details re how the race was playing out as I was conscious to do my own thing early. Passing by the commentators though I learned I had about 1 minute of clear air either side of me. One lap down, 3 to go.

Out of town and back across the lakes, not surprisingly the breeze was a little stronger. And of course the rises seemed a little steeper! With the morning clouds burning off I started to feel a bit warmer and this seemed to affect me quicker than perhaps it should have. Fortunately with such a fantastic support crew on hand I was able to send out a request for Stacey to have my hat and sunnies ready for collection when next I passed through town. Well organised drinks stations every 2km staffed by army cadets provided regular throw some water over my head.

Got a pleasant surprise when Stacey appeared earlier than expected as she had managed to source a bike from a friendly stranger. Never the less towards the end of the 2nd lap I'm feeling pretty warm, becoming less chatty and increasingly aware that this is turning into a very solo run.

Back through town after about 24km where I learn the leader has pulled away a little. An inconveniently placed toilet is ignored despite other urges, but the next one is virtually on the road and I seriously need a dump! A one minute delay costs me 2nd place. Frustrating, but necessary. (Too many latte's in recent days, doh, ahhh the perils of mixing holidays and marathons!)

Heading out of town the 3rd time and I'm probably 50m behind 2nd. 1st is out of sight, and pretty much out of mind now, though the crew encourage me otherwise. We start lapping the back markers which at least gave me the chance to talk to other runners for some brief moments. I'm feeling reasonably confident that I'll reclaim 2nd. Head wind and Forbes Hill for the 3rd time and I set myself the goal to close the gap before the start of the final lap so that I might be able to get some cover on the final crossing.

However just as I was conjuring up that plan I become aware my pace had dropped and I was staring at a 4:20 split. Given that included the hill I wasn't overly concerned, but the next split wasn't much better and I was clearly starting to find the going a bit tough. I don't know if he got the word somehow, but the guy in 2nd had upped his cadence and was pulling away. Good move by him. Not much I could do about it and I was now just trying to find the right pace for me.

By the time we got back to town for the start of the final lap I was in a bit of trouble. On reflection I was probably even panicking a bit. Duncan tries to calm me down with the news that 4th is not in the frame and encourages me to do whatever I need to do to right the ship, so a few steps start creeping in. I get angry with myself about this and get going again, but I'd opened the window for some cramps to knock on the door, darn it. Those missing 1%'ers were coming home to roost!

The last lap was pretty poor, 4:25ish average I think. My average pace slipped below 4 mins, but I couldn't seem to salvage the slide, all I really focussed on was holding on to 3rd. Up the final rise then relief when the 2km to go sign comes up and it's pretty much flat ground from there. The crew obviously sense the danger has passed and head to the finish.

Across the causeway for the final time then slowly hobble my way into town and across the finish line. Fortunately 4th was still over a minute behind as I very much doubt I would have been able to muster a response had he challenged. The benefit of a small event means I'm in the welcoming arms of the support crew 5 metres later. Legs are shot (even though I did pay the pipers) and I'm not in a terribly good way, so I wouldn't exactly call it an elaborate celebration. 2:51 is nothing to jump up and down about, but I'm pretty content to be getting a medal and my mood improves. Stacey confirms I'm the 1st old bugger home. Sure, it wasn't a strong field, but I'm claiming it 😊

Our accommodation is about 600m from the finish line. It was a mighty slow walk. Just enough time to have a short rest, shower and get Stacey back to the start line for the 10km event. Her motivation is waning given she'd be traipsing all over the place for me since 4am, but like a trooper she was off. Conveniently the bakery is across the road from the start/finish area so the rest of us give that a fair old smashing. Stacey comes home just on 57 mins. Pretty solid morning's work from her I reckon.

Presentations at noon on the Village Green where Stacey cleans up the spot prize to go along with my own little booty!

Not much later and we're indulging at the very comfortable pub, soaking up the sunshine on a very pleasant afternoon. Food and drinks are being equally consumed at a decent tempo. Unfortunately Em & Duncan have to catch the 4pm ferry home, though given the pace Duncan was setting perhaps it was a blessing in disguise!

Just as they are getting ready to leave, Phil (the guy Stacey borrowed the bike from) comes over to introduce himself so it's a pretty smooth transition into the next round of drinks. In the ensuing hours we find ourselves back at his cabin along with 30-40 other members of the North Suburbs Running Group (pretty much the Milers of north Perth) BBQing, singing, dancing and having a whale of a time. When eventually its time to call it quits, scenes reminiscent of ChCh 2010 as we find ourselves repeatedly walking down the same street trying to find the way home!

All in all a fantastic experience. Not terribly impressed with my last 10km, but I got the podium that I coveted so I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself. The event was very well organised and the course very scenic but challenging. In terms of the hills, probably best compared to running a marathon in reverse laps around the tan. I'll happily recommend the event to anyone not looking to run a PB, the only downside being it's a lonely run if you're a sub 3 hour runner.

Massive thanks of course to Stacey for letting me pursue my crazy dreams and to Em & Duncan for giving up your weekend to support me. There were a fair few friends who generously took in our kids and pets to let us have a rare few adult days, much thanks to Natalie & Steve, Liz & Grant, Denise & Keith, you're gems.

Not sure what's next for me, but I think I'm actually better for the run so it probably won't be too long before I set my sights on something. For now though it's time to eat, drink and be merry 😊

Pre match entertainment



Game face on. The winner is extreme right, 2nd place obscured. I was expecting the tall guy next to me to be a challenger but he never threatened.



Across the salt lakes for the first time



End of first lap, 14km, lonely running



Returning to town via the salt lake, lap 2. The backdrop gives a good indication of the undulating terrain, not steep but plenty of it.



Remind me why we do this



Rotto's premier support crew



That's my girl, check out the bollards in the finishing chute



I'm bringing booty back

