



## Introduction

This Race Report describes my 2013 Boston Marathon experience. It's written with a runner audience in mind. Whilst this Boston Marathon will be remembered for its tragedy, this Report focuses primarily on the race itself and my preparation for it.

## Where it started

I hadn't given much thought to race in Boston until fairly recently. It was the 2012 Tokyo Marathon and my target time for that race that revealed the opportunity for Boston Qualification. Actually, it was my running buddy Matt Callaghan who alerted me to Boston's 3:10 qualification requirement for my age group. The day before I ran that race, I'd said out loud that I was aiming to run better than 3:10. Playing on my mind as I found needed encouragement in the warlike chorus of 'Fighto! Fighto! Fighto!' from the deep crowd lining the final few kilometers of the Tokyo street course, was not the prospect of failing to qualify for the 2013 Boston Marathon, rather, it was disappointment of letting down my in-laws who had travelled half-way across Japan to see me run this race. Somehow, I found the drive to run the final kilometer of the day faster than any before it, earning me a PB well beyond my capability at the time: 3:09:58. BQ by two seconds.

## Qualification and race entry

Whilst, achieving BQ is one thing, being accepted by the BAA is something altogether different. This is especially the case for people with a qualifying time close to or at the limit of BQ. People like me. Prospective runners for the 2013 race were told that the application process for this year's race would be improved. Application windows would be progressively released until all places taken, favouring those with the greatest BQ margin, with the greatest margins eligible for the first release, followed by the next greatest margin for the next and so on. In my case, with a diminutive BQ buffer, my prospects of earning a spot were poor at best. I might not even be invited to apply. The 2012 race, and its record-breaking extreme weather, provided a defer option for the 2013 race for thousands of runners unwilling to face those conditions. This

extraordinary allowance meant that not only was I vying with the usual race interest, but also with a previously unseen source of demand. Nevertheless, when thankfully and quite surprisingly, the final call for applicants was made on September 18, I applied.

It took almost four weeks for BAA's confirmation to arrive. I was incredulous. It was mid-October. I had six months.

## **Training and preparation**

My Tokyo experience provided a useful training effect insight; a focus on hill and speed work clearly conferred both speed and endurance benefits. It can't be said that I was getting these two training styles right, but leading into my Boston training I was confident that these would both feature strongly in my programme.

Roughly speaking, the training approach I had in mind involved speed or hills on Tuesdays and Thursdays, recovery kilometers on Thursdays and slow long sessions on Sundays. This schedule, growing in workload, would see me covering about 80 kilometers at its peak. I was reasonably happy that a focus on quality and variety would provide a decent foundation for a fast time in Boston.

By New Year, I was enjoying a good training rhythm, was free of injury and at about 67 kilograms, happy with my weight. At about the same time, Dozer suggested two changes to my training programme: increased mileage and core strength / flexibility development. To these I added a weekly tempo run.

Running with the Milers provided me a format that allowed me to both push myself beyond my usual speed threshold and meaningfully track my performance. I could see that my endurance and speed were improving, thanks to our Tuesday and Thursday high-intensity sessions. There was a time when I dreaded these sessions, but this mantle of lament was soon redirected to my tempo sessions, done alone around Albert Park Lake, at the break of dawn Saturdays. It's not just that they were arduous (because they certainly were), but rather that running at pace for an extended period - a period that grew with each week - was something new to me. I was increasingly comfortable with speed sessions - I grew strangely fond of Gosch's after a while - and was amply comfortable with long and slow, after all, I had run about 1,500 mostly very slow kilometers in preparation for Comrades the year prior. Tempo felt ominous for a reason I can't really explain. The prospect of the session triggered the feeling of being trapped or suffocated. Of course, all was fine at the completion of a given tempo run. Until the next one, that was.

When it came to sticking to the programme, I was ruthless. If weather, work or something else interfered with a planned run, I would make up for that session. Often, I would run further than planned for a given day. This approach saw me far exceed planned mileage and I observe speed and endurance improvements. Whereas prior to my enhanced training programme, when I could manage a 5.05 kilometer Mona Fartlek, I found myself running 5.29 and 5.32 kilometers for the same session. Witnessing this minor transformation, I convinced myself that completing the marathon in under three hours was conceivable.

The most interesting development during training was the strong progress I saw in my tempo performances. My plan, commencing January, was to start with five kilometers, building one or two per week until I reached half marathon distance. The pace I'd run would be my target marathon pace or marginally quicker: 4:12-15 minutes per kilometer. Tempo runs, critically, helped me discover comfortable race pace; the 18 kilometer tempo run of late March provided the exciting confirmation that 4:05 was borderline comfortable and that 4:10 was long-term sustainable. This insight would be the core of my race plan for Boston.

I ran a few events during the months leading up to Boston. The Two Bays 28 kilometer trail run was disappointing in the sense that my time was ordinary, but useful in that it taught me the importance of balanced energy intake. After clear electrolyte and carbohydrate overconsumption, I resolved to race the way I train: use gels for fuel and only drink water. Didn't my dentist also suggest this?

A more positive race experience was the Wangaratta Half Marathon. I approached this race as a tempo run. Run in February, it featured fairly early in my Boston training programme. According to my tempo schedule, I was due to run only 12 kilometers by that time, and was prepared to run the first 12 as a tempo then allow the remainder of the race distance to be undertaken at a more leisurely pace. The day, despite being rather warm, was good to me. I felt comfortable as I passed the 12 kilometer mark and decided to carry on at tempo pace. Seeing Bacchus run a strong race - and win it – provided the encouragement to challenge myself. This experience also helped me build the confidence that I could sustain tempo pace for greater distances and got me thinking that my PB goal was increasingly realistic.

The 5Ms at Barwon, four weeks ahead of Boston, served as a highly satisfying quality session as well as showed me what fast could really look like. There's something special about running a relay. Having your teammates depend on you and your running ability, and navigation skills (sorry, Smurf) is a responsibility that demands (more) respect.

All said, I was more than happy with my preparation for Boston. Now all I had to do was make it work when it mattered.

Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total	Comment
	Recovery	Speed	Recovery	Speed/hill	Tempo	Recovery	SLR/race		
W1: 04.02	0	10	10	10	14	0	24	<b>68</b>	
W2: 11.02	10	11	12	8	0	14	32	<b>87</b>	
W3: 18.02	10	12	11	0	12	11	22	<b>78</b>	Wangaratta half-marathon
W4: 25.02	10	12	10	12	0	18	31	<b>94</b>	Ganly; Mona 5.32k
W5: 04.03	10	11	11	11	0	21	36	<b>101</b>	
W6: 11.03	10	13	12	17	13	21	16	<b>103</b>	5Ms
W7: 18.03	13	13	14	13	16	22	33	<b>125</b>	Mona 5.29k; 18k tempo @ 4:06m/km
W8: 25.03	0	14	15	16	16	14	25	<b>100</b>	
W9: 01.04	14	13	14	14	12	0	14	<b>81</b>	
W10: 08.04	0	0	8	6	0	0	8	<b>21</b>	BAA 5k
W11: 15.04	42							<b>42</b>	Boston Marathon
								<b>899</b>	

*Training programme: ten weeks to race day*

## Expo and registration

The John Hancock Sports & Fitness Expo opens on the Friday before Marathon Monday and serves as race number pick-up for runners and a commercial extravaganza for all things running. My wife and I were running the BAA 5k on the Sunday and picked up our race entry packs for both races when Expo opened Friday morning. I had big expectations for the Expo, and regrettably, was a little underwhelmed. I'm very happy to have picked-up a pair of Adidas Adios Boost shoes and sample a sublime massage chair at that event, but aside from these highlights, there was little appeal at Expo. It has to be said though that my frame of reference was the Tokyo Marathon Expo, which, consistent with that race, is a pure spectacle. As tempting as it was, I resisted all urges to wear my new Adidas shoes for the race. House's 2011 Boston Marathon Race Report expertly covers the pros and cons of Expo acquired footwear and is essential reading for anyone considering Boston.

## Race day

Race morning was the usual. Mind-numbingly early alarm - which felt out of place especially considering the 10am start - followed by breakfast, dressing, and nervous queuing for runner transport. The Boston course follows the historic route from Hopkinton to downtown Boston. Hopkinton is very urban and feels far further than marathon distance from the city. The logistics of transporting thousands of runners to the usually small town start area are complicated and the bus departure time early. The sight of literally hundreds of yellow American school buses swallowing Boston Common alone is worth the trip there.

The start area was unremarkable in the sense that it is what could be expected for any large marathon. One image that does stand out, and is chilling upon reflection, is that of law enforcement sharp-shooters atop the school buildings adjoining the start area.

## **Pre-race**

My priority just prior to the race was a decent warm-up. I had learned the value of warm-up the hard way after suffering cramps after just four kilometers at the Portland Marathon in 2012. There's a good kilometer from drop-off area to start line in Hopkinton and ample opportunity for warm-up. I jogged all the way to my starting berth, corral seven. One less thing to worry about. Or so I had thought.

For the week leading up to Marathon morning, I had monitored the day's weather forecast, almost obsessively. This mania was fed by its ever-changing prognosis, especially for wind. First a mild headwind was expected, then a sidewind, then a strong tailwind, then a mild tailwind, then a mild headwind. All this meteorological review was as trying as a tempo run. Almost. Luckily, conditions that morning were perfect. If there was any wind, it was barely discernable. Air temperature was an impressive nine degrees.

## **Race**

Before I knew it, I'd sung The Star Spangled Banner and was off and running. Being in corral seven, it took almost seven minutes to clear the start line.

The steepest hill on the Boston Marathon course isn't Heartbreak Hill or any of the hills in Newton, rather, it's the hill leading out of Hopkinton. And it's downhill. Exercising maximum caution at the outset, my first two kilometers were my slowest and third slowest for the race, 4:24 and 4:21 respectively. Whilst I had managed to infuse some warmth into my legs, I was convinced that the chilly conditions meant I remained a cramp risk for at least the first ten kilometers. By kilometer four, I had found my rhythm and was comfortable at 4:10-15 pace, just as my tempo runs had suggested. My objective for this early stage was to remain calm, try to take in as much of the happenings around me as I could and maintain a sustainable pace. I regularly asked myself, 'Am I comfortable at this pace? Can I speed up if required?'. I kept myself in check, ensuring answers to these two questions remained Yes and Yes.

A scare occurred at about kilometer six: cramps in the right shin. Was this Portland again? Perhaps not. I had warmed up this time and wasn't running anywhere my limit. The cramping itself didn't feel as acute and wasn't worsening. I committed to hold firm and try to ride this out. Thankfully it worked and by about kilometer eight, the cramp had gone.

What I can recall from the first half of the course is that the outskirts of Boston are lovely; pretty towns, cheery locals, rich flora and clean air. I focused on those things that would help me remain calm. I resisted the urge to look at my watch where I could, I made a point of not 'counting the kilometers', I distracted myself with thoughts such as how would I structure this Race Report? At one point I recall seeing a

'Mansfield' street sign and committed to finding the street after the race. Later, I could never find that street. Had I really seen this? Imagined or not, my objective of remaining even-keeled, mentally and physically was being fulfilled.

Halfway came through in 1:29:01. I was right on my race plan, and if anything, ahead of it. I obsessively asked myself the two status questions. At halfway, I was more than satisfied that I had both run more quickly than planned and I was feeling fresh and capable of speeding up if required. I was aware that the second half of the Boston Marathon course was harder than the first and that the four infamous Newton Hills lay in wait. During my preparation for the race, I polled Boston alumni on this topic. As much as I had tried, I learnt that it's next to impossible to establish an objective reading on these - or really any hills - without taking them on by one's self. My petitioning surfaced multifarious and often conflicting reports: 'the hills will break any runner', 'they are not that bad', 'what hills?'. I co-opted the more cautious, resigning to take them on slowly and steadily. The first hill appears at kilometer 26 and the last - the much-fabled 'Heartbreak Hill' at 34. It came as some relief to find that for the first three hills, my pace dropped only slightly, never exceeding 4:15. I can't say that the maligned Heartbreak Hill stayed true to its reputation as my pace deteriorated only marginally for that kilometer. Nevertheless, by the time I had reached the highest point in Newton, even the prospect of nothing but downhill to the finish, couldn't undo the deterioration in my legs. I could feel a burning in my quads and my knees began to ache. For the first time in the race, my self-assessment revealed that I was no longer fresh and couldn't muster the drive to push any harder. I convinced myself that this in itself was positive and that with eight kilometers to go, this is what I should be experiencing.

Overcoming Heartbreak Hill is a watershed moment. From this point forward, the crowd sentiment is markedly different. It's feverish, escalating in its intensity. It carries you along and is infectious. There's a sting of 'this is hard but it is possible'. Every runner parses this signal, absorbs it and uses it to keep going. I learned a valuable phrase in this section of the course: 'you got this'. Exactly. Grammatically grating, but who cares? Self-platitudes in the third-person in their visceral impactful best.

What, on the other hand, was less useful was the droning protestation of one competitor directed to his running companion: 'F#ck running slower. You're gonna beat this son of a b#tch m#therf#cker. Goddamit keep f#cking going.' As much as I tried, I could not get away from this voice. Just when I thought I had cut loose of it, there came more: 'beat this b#stard m#therf#cker!'. Maybe his parser was switched off? Maybe his 'you got this' virulence had dried up? Maybe he'd never even tried that? Maybe he'd been trumpeting it all the way from Boston Common bus pick-up? Who knows.





*40k: Kenmore Square / Fenway Park – taken by my wife, Natsuko*

So I with three kilometers to go, I've been enthused with steady Bostonian 'you got this' encouragement and mildly disturbed by the curiously contrasted profanity from another runner, but I'm feeling OK. I know this because I recall looking forward to passing where my wife and friends would be waiting, just outside Fenway Park. I also have the presence of mind to calculate a race time of better than 2:59. The Citgo sign comes into view. Usually, this billboard is invisible. It's just another work of advertising adorning this New England city skyline. But every Patriots' Day, it sings loudly and boldly 'One mile to go, runners! You go this!' Just about now I recognise that I have passed Fenway and didn't spot Natsuko. That's bad and good news. Two more corners, and one minor descent and climb and I'm home. I try to push harder for a stronger finish. 'You go this'. Nothing. Try something else: 'beat this son of a b#tch m#therf#cker'. No cigar. I'm on Boylston Street and can see the finish. I mildly lift my pace. Legs are crying out for relief. I cross the line. 2:57:36. Wow.



**BOSTON MARATHON**

*John Hancock*

## 117th Boston Marathon Home

### Current Leaders

**6488 Koelmeyer, Gerard A.**

Windsor AUS

**Start Time Offset: -**

**Pace: 0:06:47**

**Finish Time:**

**Projected: 2:57:37**

**Official: 2:57:37**

**Checkpoints:**

**40k: 2:48:19**

**35k: 2:27:30**

**30k: 2:06:20**

**25k: 1:45:14**

**Half: 1:29:01**

**20k: 1:24:28**

**15k: 1:03:24**

**10k: 0:42:28**

**5k: 0:21:29**

*Race results*

## **Finish**

Most of you reading this will be familiar with the relief and jubilation of a good race, so I needn't go into this here. It's every runner's dream to chase and achieve a goal, especially when that goal is ambitious or previously unimagined. Upon crossing the Boylston Street finish line on, what struck me, was not the satisfaction of the moment, rather, it was the speed at which the desire to do better formed. Unlike Tokyo, where I ran beyond my ability, my preparation meant that save for poor conditions or bad luck on race day, I deserved to run under three hours. For a moment, I considered what might have been had I stood a little closer to the cliff, held a swifter pace. That might have paid off, but more likely it would have been the setup for my undoing.

Shortly after crossing the finish line, I attempted to linger in that area, keen to see my friends who were still running, finish the race. Lester Smith at sixty-two years old, was running his 150th competitive marathon and expected to cross the line not too far after me. Race staff swiftly petitioned me to exit the finish area. It's quite a walk from the finish area to bag collection and further again the to the family meeting area. I was due to meet my party at two o'clock and had almost one hour to reach there. That suited me just fine as the process of receiving my bag, changing my clothes, drinking something, and finding some peace suited me just fine. That moment where pain sets into the legs, where walking becomes difficult, is, ironically one of the most liberating feelings I have known. It's hard to explain and even harder to achieve without the months of training and 42.4 kilometers of punishment before it.

Later, I met Natsuko, our friends, and Matt. We all agreed that this race and Patriots' Day was thrilling to be a part of. As we entered the subway – the 'T' as it's known locally – just behind the finishing area, the first of two large explosions rocked the city. For us at least, it was a narrow escape.

### **Reflection and what's next**

The act of violence that Patriots Day took a while to both reveal its malicious truth, and took even longer for its meaning to be understood. The experience left me feeling numb. One of the best days I'd had known quickly turned into one of the worst. Even some time after that day, it's difficult to reconcile this.

My Boston experience showed me a few things. First, it reminded me that the Marathon is like a complex puzzle. Training and preparation is a major component of this puzzle and that careful examination and refinement can lead you to places thought impossible. I'm convinced that there's scope to train even more effectively and that my fastest races are ahead of me. Second, it showed me that there's nothing like good advice. Without speaking with House, Dozer, Rog, Racer, I would have wasted this opportunity. If only I had access to this expertise when I first attempted the marathon in 2008. Perhaps I would have run better than 4:55:00. Third, every race, indeed every day, is an opportunity to do one's best. You never know what's around the corner. So make the most of the present.