

Melbourne Marathon 2012

Report by Dale "Rafa" Nardella

Introduction

Until this year, running a marathon was never a goal of mine. Before joining the Melbourne Midday Milers (milers) in early 2008 I had done little running. The odd school races and jogging twice a week before university classes. That was about it. After joining the milers I realised how much work I needed to put in just to become better than the average runner in my age group. Almost four years of training with the milers and a season with Collingwood Harriers AC I started to gain some confidence in my ability to consider training for a marathon.

Early days

To give some context about how fresh I was at running, I'll explain my first experience of running a lap of the Tan Track (tan) in February 2008.

I had just started a new job and I had mentioned to my new work colleague, Anthony Mithen (Mitho), that I enjoyed the odd trot. Actually, I thought I was a handy little runner and that I'd make a good impression. Wrong. We ran a lap, Mitho was doing all the talking while I was in a world of pain, trying to keep up with him. It wasn't pretty. Lap time: 18:45.

Despite this experience and plenty of others in those early days, I kept making appearances at the tan with Mitho who kept giving me valuable tips and encouragement. Not much has changed which I'm pretty grateful for. Mitho even convinced me to join the milers. Done.

Looking back now at those early days, getting to know members of the milers was the easy part. Running with them was certainly not. The standard was, and still is, pretty high and just remembering how to run the session (even though I kept asking) was difficult because I was so far off the pack and when you're struggling there are a lot of brain fades.

I can vividly remember my first Botanical Fartlek session and running the wrong way as the lead pack came flying past me near the start line for a second lap. Oops. That was embarrassing. I still rate this session as one of the toughest on the program.

All of this didn't bother me too much because I knew my running was slowly improving. Also, the good company of the milers kept my spirits up.

Training for the Marathon

On 10 October 2011, the day after the 2011 Melbourne Marathon, I received the following email from Rory Heddles (Racer):

Hi Dale,

Sorry I missed you on Sunday. We were on St Kilda Road, I would have come over and said g'day if I'd realised you were only 100m away :-)

My long term plan for a while has been to build to a point where I could run the 2012 Melbourne Marathon. While everything has not gone exactly to plan I'm planning to go ahead and run next year, aiming to go sub 3 hours.

The theme from a lot of the marathon stories is linking up with people at similar ability and training / working together for motivation etc and was wondering if you'd be interested in having a tilt yourself. There's a new guy, Damian Arnold who I'm not sure if you've met yet, who is a bit fitter than I am but close enough that we've done a few sessions together so I'm going to ask him also.

I think a group of 3 people could work well.

Anyway I hope you're interested, would be good to have you on board! Let me know what you think.

Cheers, Rory

Racer obviously was pumped up about what he had just seen the day before – at least fifteen milers having a crack at the marathon. There were some amazing efforts that day especially from guys who

may not have run the time they wanted. It was the way those guys guts it out that made me appreciate Racer's enthusiasm to have a crack except for the running sub 3hrs bit. More on that later.

I had done less running in 2011 to enjoy being a new dad to Sienna which is why I suspect I didn't immediately reply to Racer's email saying "yes, I'll do it". I was more worried about getting fitter at that point. This led me to wondering if running the marathon was too soon. I consulted Mitho who said maybe it was the right time to step up. But I had to decide whether or not I wanted to make the commitment. That was fair enough. I think I did want to test myself.

I agreed to train for the marathon with Racer and Damian Arnold (Damo) but I didn't necessarily commit to running the marathon as such. I wanted to first test myself in a difficult race that was similar to, but by no means the same as, the marathon. If I could handle this "test race" then I would have more confidence about running the marathon.

Garth Calder (Licka) had told me about the Maroondah Dam 30km Trail Run and how hilly and tough it was. I looked into it a bit more and thought it was the one to aim for because of the timing (19 February 2012), the distance and the terrain.

To prepare for this race, I started doing between 26km to 30km runs with Licka, Mitho, Mike Bialczak (Grunter) and Norval Hope (Lurch) on Sundays at Eaglemont in January (amongst other miler sessions of course). I also did a gruelling 34km run (my longest ever at that point) from Lysterfeild Lake to Belgrave and back with the MMM Oxfam team plus Shane Fielding (Slips), Mitho and Grunter. I lagged behind that day and it broke me to some degree. But the fact I had kept going, albeit slowly in hot conditions, gave me some confidence. A quick dip in the lake to cool me down also cheered me up as Grunter and Slips would attest to.

In summary, the training went well as did the race itself and I finished strongly in 3hrs, 6mins. The goal time was anything under 3hrs 30mins so I was over the moon. The training base was taking good shape.

Before I knew it, AV season was underway. Like my first AV season in 2010, I gained a lot of racing experience. In particular, how to properly pace myself at the start of races so that I could run them out strongly. I had tried and failed badly to start quick, just doesn't suit me. So I worked on getting my pace right, running a smart race etc. This transferred to my training as well.

Focused marathon training began at the start of July. Mitho had set the program and I was keen to follow it. I may have been a bit too keen because I remember telling Mitho that I was planning on doing 30km the following day after we had just run 26km. This was so I could meet the goal kms set for that week. Mitho advised against this and said I was more likely to injure myself. He recommended I run 15km if I was to do anything. It was the wiser option. Half way through that 15km run my right achilles started to hurt. I slowed down and got home in one piece but it was a good reminder that I needed to be conscious of not over doing it.

The penny dropped on a boys weekend away in Cobram in mid August. I didn't completely smash myself on the VBs at the local footy (still got up the next morning and ran for 2hrs) but the guilty conscious made me realise that if I wanted to get a good result in the marathon I'd have to start making sacrifices. Improving my diet was one of the key things to address. I decided I wouldn't touch beer or junk food up to race day. I kept to this commitment and it provided the results. I weighed 61.5kgs the week before the race, my lightest weight since high school.

Running from Eaglemont Tennis Club along the Yarra Trail always provided solid sessions with lots of different runners but usually with Lurch, (Ewan Vowels) Smurf, Stephen Paine (House), John Hand (Job), Tony Hally (Hally), Mitho & Licka. On one occasion Smurf and Lurch put in a 10km tempo surge after already running 20km. This looked impossible to do at first, but I tried it out the next time running with them and felt stronger for it. Something to keep in mind for next time.

Other memorable long runs included Brimbank (34km with Racer, Damo & Smurf) and Churchill Park (35km with Slips, Andrew Coles (Woolies), Joji, Racer & Smurf). The latter run was very similar to the run I really struggled with earlier in the year with the Oxfam guys. I was much better shape this time around.

By early September I started to feel like I was running well. Running in the B group during miler sessions always tested me and I found myself at the front of the pack sometimes. Importantly, my split times in the Ganly, 1500 progressive, 6 x 3min and 4 x 2km sessions were coming down. Good signs.

The biggest confidence boost came at the Burnely Half where Simon Beverage's (Bevo) brilliant pacing set the scene for me to kick hard in the last 4 kms and run a 4min plus PB. Thanks Bevo. Being on the winning team at miler relay in Romsey was also a highlight. Well done to Katie Seibold, Hally & Woolies on a great team effort.

I had few niggles along the way, nothing serious. While it's difficult to know for certain, back and leg massages every 2-3 weeks possibly helped avoid injury. I also kept to my program, stretched and used the leg roller while watching TV.

In summary, I had about 3 months of uninterrupted training before the marathon. My biggest week was 95kms and I averaged approximately 75km per week from July to the marathon. The body felt the best it's ever been in my life.

Race Plans

About two weeks before the marathon I settled on trying to run between 4:15 - 4:20 pace per km for a finishing time between 3hrs and 3hrs 5mins. This was supported by Mitho who did the analysis of my year to date and felt I was not quite at the sub-3hr level yet. He was spot on as it turned out.

Racer had suspicions about my goal time and had previously predicted on the miler forum that I would run 2hr 55min. Flattering as it was, I didn't get carried away with the hype, particularly after the Burnley experience where "Rafa fans" started popping up making all sorts of Herald Sun headlines about my form. Conscious of me getting ahead of myself, Mitho warned me to stay away from the forum, so I did.

Race Day

Jim Nardella (Dad) drove me to the MCG. Dad likes to shop real early at the Vic Market so this was no issue for him. I had to hide my uneasiness about the route he drove, Fairfield via Plenty Rd. Did he want me to be late? As it turned out, these were just nerves getting the better of me. We got to the MCG at 6am. But we did stop at two different servos so I could go to the toilet but didn't have much luck (not available and broken seat). I was pissed off and decided to try my luck at the MCG. I knew this could be risky because of the long queues. It wasn't too bad, maybe a 15min wait. If I had got there 5min later I would have been in trouble. It was a procession of male runners that went past the toilet entry just waiting to unleash.

Got to a fairly empty start line at 6:30am and spoke to a couple of seasoned runners (unknown to me) about my plans. One guy was sitting on the curb telling me he was resting his legs. Why stand up for an extra 30min than everyone else? Good point, I sat down as well. This settled my nerves. Said a quick hello to Racer, Colin Thornton (Thorney), Mitho, and House. Thorney was pacing the 3hr 10min group and I hoped not to see him during the race. He says the same as well. National anthem was sung, shuffle to the start line after preferred start runners take off, then I'm off. First miler I saw on course at about 5km was Troy Williams (TW), great to see him out and about.

I sat well behind the 3hr pace group and avoided the congestion because I knew it would take some energy away. Racer was about 10 - 20 metres in front of me until about 10km where he moved forward. The first 10kms flew by as Richard Does (Dozer) told me it would.

At 12km, Gary O'Dwyer (GGO) and I had an awkward moment where he had to quickly sprint (in bike cleats) to hand me my hat and gel after I dropped them on the first go. GGO got to me and handed me the gel but slipped over, nearly cleaned himself up on the chain fence and then had to catch up with me again to hand over my hat. Grunter was clearly laughing in the background. Meanwhile, I closely missed running into a barricade while watching GGO do this. Amusing stuff, kept my mind off running for a few kms.

At 13km, I saw Thai Phan (Snake) taking photos and I gave him a thumbs up. I knew that wouldn't happen again during the race if I saw him. Spotted TW again, Anthony Lee (AL), Paul Marsh (Bacchus), Slips, David Venour (Smoothy), Glenn Goodman (GG) and other milers. Great stuff this. Probably didn't acknowledge them as much as what I should have (sorry guys), I put this down to just focusing on what I was doing. Certainly heard their voices and I knew whatever I did they'd show their support. The race to this point had been fairly simple and straight.

At 21km, I was sitting right behind House in the 3hr pace group. I felt good but needed a leek because the bladder was seriously starting to bother me. Not sure why. I don't think I over drank pre-race but perhaps another quick leek before the race may have avoided this. Could be worse I thought. I had a quick chat to Damian Angus, on pacing duties with House, who suggested I do it now because the pain could get worse or make me drink less. That was not what I wanted, so the decision was made to duck off to a toilet block in the middle of the road to do my business. I probably lost about 30 to 40 seconds and if I had my time again I would have done it more efficiently with less effort. The pace group was some 300mtrs ahead when I got back on course. The question was, should I try and catch up or not?

At 22km, GGO hands me my gel and water, I tell him I took a leek and he yells "relax, don't try and catch the pace group, run you own race". I took his advice. I realise in the later stages of the race that even if I had not needed a leek and stayed with the pace group I probably wouldn't have kept up because my times started slowing around 34km. Sub 3hrs wasn't the goal anyway. If I had tried to catch the 3hr pace group I would have seriously blow up. GGO's advice effectively saves me from doing this.

Despite GGO's great advice, it was difficult to find my rhythm after stopping. I was soo unsettled when just a few minutes ago I hadn't been. The legs felt slightly more heavier for some reason. How could this be? This played on my mind a bit and doubt started to creep in. I started thinking things like "idiot, you've stuffed up your race" and "all that training and now look how crap you're running". I had to quickly overcome this doubt, I still had another 20km to run. I started thinking about my training. The hard sessions. Surely that means something to me. I starting thinking of the message Bacchus sent me four days before the marathon:

"Getting to the start line of the marathon is a real credit to your persistence. Many of us have admired how you have gone about it, working your guts out at the back of the pack and coming back for more when many others have come and gone. This trait alone will hold you in good stead for Sunday. Run your own race and enjoy it (well enjoy the first half anyway)."

Yes I had worked too hard to give up easily. I would be massively disappointed if I did. Time to get on with it and focus on racing the second half and not feeling sorry for myself. I grinded out the next 10kms or so at an average 4:15 pace running initially alone and then with another runner who was doing what seemed like pretty even splits. This was good. I felt I had some rhythm again. The so-called Fitzroy Street hill came and went pretty quickly. All of a sudden I'm heading down St Kilda Road looking at the Melbourne skyscrapers thinking wow, I'm actually heading for home, how good is that. Racer suddenly appears ahead. I give him a tap on the back as I pass and he wishes me well for a strong finish.

At 32km, GGO hands me my last gel. Snake came up to me on his bike and started asking what sounded like rhetorical questions. Cheeky bugger. My only response was to throw my water bottle in his direction to let him know that I was still functioning and no he wasn't funny. I knew the course pretty well from here except I was a bit slow off the mark to veer off from the half course and another marathoner accidentally elbowing me in the ribs as he crossed over. No harm done and I apologised but he didn't acknowledge it which fired me up.

This was a good thing because Smoothy's hill was on its way. My attitude towards any uphill section of the course was that if it's not bigger than the hills I have done in training then I will do ok. Thus, I gritted my teeth and tried to keep the momentum going up Smoothy's hill even though I was slowing. GGO joined me and gave plenty of encouragement. Got to the top, relaxed a bit to control the breathing and then pushed off again. My heart went out to Dozer at this point. Seeing him walking I knew something was up (sick that week I later found out). But in typical Dozer form, he yells "hug the corners, it's the shortest way around". It was uplifting to say the least.

The last 8km hurt a lot because my right quad and calf felt like someone was punching it, a corky feeling if you will. This pain started around 28km and just progressively got worse as the pounding took its toll the more I ran. The irony was that going downhill hurt the most which, at this stage of the race, I thought I would be pleased to see. But the body had other ideas. This restricted my ability to finish with a bit more speed. I was genuinely worried about cramping or straining the muscle and stopping altogether. Not to worry, keep grinding the kms out as fast as I can manage I told myself.

At 38km, I saw Bacchus, AL, Snake, Slips, Smoothy, GGO and others (sorry if I missed you). These guys gave me a massive rev up, saying stuff like "keep pushing Raf, you look strong" etc. Legends. They had been doing it all day and when I needed it the most, they were there.

Finishing the race in the MCG was all a bit of a blur, probably because of the pain. It was great though. The best was seeing Lurch, Smurf, Hally, House, Rog, Licka, Dizzy and Racer after crossing the finish line and learning how well they did. Congrats gents. That was the "cherry on the top" moment. Also found out later that Brett Coleman (FatAss) ran a 2:26, phenomenal effort.

Post Race Thoughts

Very happy indeed with the result. I finished in the top 4% of the 6,000 odd field and ran well within the time range I had set myself.

It took me a good 25min to walk to the car and I was in pain. But the pain was absolutely worth it and it was great catching up with Racer, House, Dizzy and Smurf (and their families) for my first beer in two and half months.

Probably the most pleasing aspect of my race was grinding out the kms without losing too much time even though I started to doubt myself and the body was starting to give in. The second half was about 3 minutes slower than the first half. The 10kms splits are:

10km: 00:42:25

20km: 00:41:57

30km: 00:42:32

40km: 00:45:39

I will run another marathon which I'm glad to say because I wondered if it would make me like running less. It's done quite the opposite. I almost feel like this is the start of my running experience.

Thanks

To Liz and Sienna, they gave me all the love, support and time I needed to prepare for my debut marathon. Without them, it just wasn't possible. Thanks also to friends and family who supported me right up to race day.

To the milers. Within four years, I have gone from hardly being able to run a lap of the tan to this year running: 13:59 (Tan, 43sec PB), 39:49 (Flemington 10km, 2min PB), 85:27 (Burnley Half, 4:03 PB) and 3:02:41 (Marathon Debut). The stats speak for themselves and the encouragement along the way has been phenomenal.

Special thanks to:

Mitho who, as the above times show, put a well-thought out program together and gave me sensible advice whenever I asked. He's also been very patient with my development.

Racer and Damo for planting the marathon training seed. Unfortunately injury got the better of Damo. But he'll be back soon I'm sure.

Drinks man GGO and all other milers and friends who were out on course on the day (cheering, pacing or otherwise).

Cheers, Rafa