

Melbourne Marathon 2014 - Mark Stodden (Stods)

Running in 2014 was always going to be about one thing - seeing what was possible when I seriously applied myself to training for a Marathon.

For those who want to save a few pages of reading, here's the shortened version:

It worked, and beyond what I would have thought possible. I'm absolutely stoked. What's more, along the way I made a lot of new friends and discovered that racing distances other than the Marathon is awesome too.

Apologies to those who just want to hear what happened on Sunday, but hopefully someone will appreciate some background first.

2013, Where it all began

Melbourne Marathon 2013 I was running my 3rd attempt at breaking the elusive 3 hours. I wasn't part of any clubs, didn't really know more than 1 or 2 other runners, and my idea of serious training was going for 2 runs in the same week.

My 2013 marathon training season started about 7 weeks before the marathon and peaked with a week of 70.1km (which incidentally I exceeded even during serious taper this year in the week prior to marathon week).

Taking 3 attempts at 3 hours had been a character building experience. I'd learnt that any natural aptitude only gets you "so far", and it had also taught me the risks of getting greedy. Both of my previous attempts I'd been nicely on track for sub-3 at 25km, only to overreach and blow up, running a painful 3:10 in 2011 and a 3:05 in 2012.

Back to the 2013 Marathon. I must have looked lonely out there, because at about the 22km marker a guy in a red singlet pulls up next to me and starts up a conversation. Turns out this is David Mellings, or Rog as I've called him ever since. We talk for about 4km, and he invites me to come join the Milers. That year I run a 2:54:45, which I'm stoked about, but I've got this crazy idea in my head from a guy named Rog, that if I join a running group that I might be able to do better...

2014, The Training Begins

So I join the Milers in late 2013. I quickly discover you guys are awesome, I don't need to tell you that. And from the start it's all about the Marathon. Every session at the Tan is another step closer to October. People try to start conversations that involve foreign acronyms like "AV" and "XCR" but I steer the conversation back to more familiar topics, like Marathons. I try not to be distracted by things like club championships or other distances. But it doesn't last.

At the start of July Rog tells me that he is getting coaching from the legendary Strava ambassador Mr. Woolies. I'm very impressed... big Strava & Woolies fan here.

So at the start of July I send a message to Woolies asking if he could give me some pointers to help me achieve a sub-2:50 Marathon. And over the next 3 months I focus.

No more riding to work, or bootcamp sessions - too much interference with my running training. Not much participation in MMM sessions, not that there's anything wrong with them, but they're not the exact sessions I have planned.

Apart from obvious sessions like a 33km long run on the weekend, the most important new session for me is the steady run at Marathon pace. Running with Rog & Lurch multiple times a week at Albert Park, this is our favourite. The point is to get more and more comfortable with Marathon pace feeling "normal", ie not panting! At the start 4:00 pace sounds inconceivable for a marathon. We start with 30min @ 4:00/km, and over the course of the next few months we turn this into 75min @ 3:57, which by the end feels easier than the original 30 minutes. Running chatting to Rog & Lurch makes the training easy, and I find myself very much looking forward to our sessions, which end up being most week days when including the easy sessions in between.

Adding an easy 2-7km jog every morning before work, and an easy 2km jog each evening helps boost the training kms. From 10 weeks prior to the Marathon my weekly kms average 85-95km, with 115km being my biggest week

I entered 2 AV XCR races to help prepare for the Marathon - Albert Park 10km and Burnley 21.1. Both are distances I've never raced before and I surprise myself by really enjoying them! It takes a while to gain confidence in my new found pace, I express some serious concerns to Rog at the 1km marker of the Albert Park 10km that we're going too fast and aren't going to last the distance, but he is confident that I keep at it and end up breaking my 5km PB twice in a row. I don't read too much into the McMillan calculator, but when I run a 35:30 10km and a 78:56 half this helps boost my confidence that my training is on track.

The Chest Infection

Everything is going perfectly until 3 weeks before the Marathon I come down with a serious chest infection. After 3 days off work, and 2 courses of anti-biotics, the doctors say the next step is hospitalisation for IV antibiotics if I don't improve. I end up not running a single step for 8 days, which means missing my last long run and the entire 3rd week prior to the marathon. I start worrying that I might not even make it to the Marathon start line, let alone run a PB. But with 2 weeks to go the chest starts to improve, gradually. Still not 100%, but I'm out running again. With 1 week to go I'm still coughing, but it's not interfering much. Now the question is what impact the infection and training interruption have had, and it's probably not going to be until 30km through the race that I find out.

Race Day

The sun comes up on race morning, and I feel good, but that could be the carbs talking. I've been carb loading, and drinking weak powerade for the last 3 days straight. I've already dropped my GUs and drinks to Gerard the Friday prior, and I'm absolutely stoked that he's going to be supporting me. Any support at all is a giant plus, but given that earlier in the year before his injury we'd talked about running Melbourne together, now at least it's nice that despite his injuries he's still going to be there along side me every 7km.

I have been pretty open about my goals and strategy - I want to hit 2:48:48, and I plan to go out around 3:55 - 3:58 pace (depending on how things feel) and allow for a bit of a positive split in the second half. It it hadn't been for the doubts in my mind from the chest infection I'd probably have aimed slightly faster, but I'm still not sure if it's compromised my stamina.

I park my car about 5:45am and then make my way to the preferred start area about 6:30. I run into 700 along the way, and when I arrive I'm greeted by a significant crowd of Milers in red. A quick 1km jog to wake up the legs (and empty the bladder) and we're moving into the preferred starting area. All of this is new to me as this is my first preferred start ever, and pretty exciting in it's own right. I'm about 6 bodies back from the line when the starting gun fires.

Unlike previous years where the first 500m was a battle for survival, this year it was perfect. Rog, Peely and I set off up the first ramp together, and could actually have a bit of a chat. Shortly after turning onto St Kilda road everyone starts to find their own pace. At 2km I'm still with Peely but the others have relaxed a little. I can see Peely is edging away, and I'm clocking about 3:50 pace. Even though it feels comfortable, this pace concerns me, so I tell him I'm going to ease off a little.

As I approach Albert Park the legs are feeling good and I'm really happy with how things are going. Stevie appears out of nowhere and starts running alongside me for the next 3-4km. We start to have a bit of a chat - It's good to have someone to talk to. I talk about my decision to not try to stick with Peely, and how I'm conflicted about whether to have my first GU. Then suddenly we're going past the Miler support team, and I'm so busy talking to Steve that I almost miss picking up my drink & GU from Gerard! Steve then carried my GU and drink for the next km so I can just gradually have sips here and there. That man is a legend.

The u-turn past the Pit building near MSAC is a big boost - as I run back past other Milers close behind me I have a seemingly endless series of encouragements shouted to me. I feel embarrassed that I fail to return many of the shouts.

As I come down Fitzroy Street I am once again cheered on by the Miler support group, and my spirits lift again. I take one sip from my water bottle then sweaty fingers accidentally drop it. My only thought is that I hope Gerard doesn't see given all the effort he's put in to get it to me!

Running toward port Melbourne my Garmin is causing me some problems. I can see that it is registering the kms more than 100 meters before the official markers, and the discrepancy is growing. It casts some serious doubts on what my actual average pace is. Also the "average lap pace" (ie pace for this km) is jumping around all over the place. I am normally glued to my watch for determining my pace, but start to find it too distracting and just trust that the pace seems about right.

As I turn around at the Port Melbourne U-Turn I see that 700 is only about 100 meters behind me! I hadn't realised that he was right there. I'm really pleased for him that he's keeping up the pace, but I also get a little defensive and speed up a little :)

Rog is a little further back and I hope he's not having any injury issues like what had happened at Burnley.

Legs are feeling good going through the halfway point, and I feel like a rockstar when I go past the Miler support area. There's screaming, numerous cameras, people running alongside, it's incredible.

As I pass another runner, his companion on a bike is giving him the progressive update from Kona, which is a welcome distraction. I wonder how Bevo is going, and it puts any pain I might be about to feel into perspective.

Up to the 27km Elwood turn around things have been relatively cruisy. I see Peely go around first and he's looking in great form, it's inspiring. According to the Garmin all 27km have been sub 4:00 kms, with an adjusted average somewhere around 3:54/km I'm guessing. Then things start slipping

The next 5 kms that take me to the top of Fitzroy Street are all 4:00 or slightly slower. Things are starting to get harder, and I'm starting to lose my resolve.

Then Gerard appears on his bike. He's offering drinks, but in fact it's his bike that saves the day. I ask him to stay with me up St Kilda road. I focus everything on keeping up with the back tyre of that bike. And it works, I lift and 4 of the next 5 kms are back sub 4:00 pace to the base of the Tan. I feel focussed and on target again.

As I start the ascent to the Shrine I start to ease off the pace, and for the first time in the last 20km someone overtakes me - which fires me right up. I'm not sure if this guy in a red shirt (not a miler) knew he was in a battle or not, but it was on. As we approach Domain road, Slips is there saying the hills done and it's time to push. Easier said than done! But my rival pushes, so I do too. We switch positions all the way to Flinders station, where I finally keep my lead.

Every year I always do a crazy kick in the last 300m. This year I was determined to push early and have nothing left at 300m. So I try to start my final sprint at around 41km.

As I turn into the final 200m and that last bloody hill, I'm done. But there's a guy about 10 meters in front of me, and someone from the crowd shouts "You can get him!". Damn right I can. So I fire up, muster a final sprint and take my final position crossing the line in 2:47:08. Peely is there waiting for me, and shakes my hand as I cross, but it's brief because I'm already headed for the grass to crash. I lay there for about 2 minutes until the St Johns people start approaching.

Then it's over, the endorphins hit, and I have the pleasure of congratulating and being congratulated by the others Milers as they come over the line.

Best race ever.

It was an amazing feeling running my first Marathon as part of the Milers. I was so proud to be wearing the singlet, to be running alongside so many talented and passionate runners also wearing the same singlet, and to be supported by an amazing group of people more focussed on making their team mate's goals possible, rather than their own for the day.

Congratulations to all the other runners!

A huge thanks to everyone who made it possible, I hope you all know who you are.

Stods