

Tokyo Marathon 2014

By Paul “Bacchus” Marsh

Background

After the devastation of the GC in 2012 and Canberra in 2013 campaign it took a while for the wounds to heal and think where to from here. One thing for certain was that wherever and whenever my next marathon was I was determined for it to be a good one... I did say that last time though. Again I thought with another year of running I should be able to run a pb, go sub 2:38 and that this was not an unreasonable expectation.

I have always wanted to have a crack at a big city marathon and House started firing a few us up about Tokyo. Have only ever heard good things about racing in Japan. Fast courses, cool conditions, good quality fields, exceptionally well organized etc. Had a chat with Kathryn and was still undecided however threw my name into the ballot and thought I would worry about it if I was lucky enough to secure a start. Well I jagged a start and then had to give it some serious thought but was not yet committed.

I received this email from Hutz on 3 October 2013 with Coalminer and House cc'd in:

“Hi Bacchus

Spoke to Gerard at lunchtime and he told me that he had put some possible accommodation your way. Really hoping that you commit to the trip.

For what it's worth, my advice is that you should move heaven and earth if necessary to get there. My Tokyo marathon experiences in the 1990's were among the highlights of not just my running career, but my life. Japan is an amazing country. The marathon culture is huge there. The organisational skills of the Japanese are flawless, so the event itself is sure to be superbly run. Japanese society is based on politeness, trust and honesty, and you see extraordinary things because of this, e.g. businessmen leaving their briefcases and neatly folded suits on park benches while they go off for a run, cars parked with the keys in the ignition while their owners duck into shops. Travellers are totally safe and treated really well.

Best of all, we can expect cold, still conditions and a flat course. Running with 36,000 other marathoners is going to be simply amazing. I can't wait.

And if you believe in good omens, you won the lottery while a lot of people who really wanted to, missed out. Make the most of it, I say.

Cheers,

Hutz”

So I showed this email to Kathryn mapped out a plan and decided to make a holiday out of it with the kids – we ended up spending just under 4 weeks in Japan. Coalminer and his better half Natsuko came over and provided us with a great deal of time and advice on where to go, what to do and booked the accommodation for us. We were pumped. But I had one more hurdle from a mental perspective to negotiate before I fully committed.

Leading up to Tokyo I had done 4 prior marathons. Melbourne 2010 and 2011, Gold Coast 2012 and Canberra 2013. All of these were raced with our esteemed president Slips. We had been through 4 marathon preparations together. How could I embark on a marathon campaign without my umbilical brother who is old enough to be my father? Would it feel right? We are 2 all in the head to head battle but I was not sure I could negotiate the hills in the Dandenongs without my human GPS. How could I get out of bed in the morning knowing that I wouldn't be training with him...

was it possible? Emotionally I wasn't sure I could prepare for a marathon, let alone race without him ☺. These photos below sum up my conundrum.



MY SLIPS SHRINE

So reluctantly made the decision to embark on my first marathon without the great man. Turned yet again to AL for advice which is very easy now that our desks are no more than 3 meters apart. The rest of the office wasn't so happy given that they knew that would be subjected to a fair amount of running talk during the course of the build up.

Training Recap

Usual drill. Built up the kms as per previous campaigns. Last few campaigns I was time poor... this time around I decided I needed to get down to the Tuesday and Thursday sessions as much as possible to ensure I was pushing myself during the speed sessions... it just didn't happen as much as I would like... work got in the way again. Did plenty of solo sessions which you simply don't get as much out of.

I looked back on what I did in 2011 when I ran my PB. It was a lot of hills - Dandenongs and Airlie street (including 3 sessions of 15 reps) and a reasonable amount of tempo running - a fair few 3 or 4 laps tan sessions each lap getting quicker or a minimum of 10km at marathon race pace along Beach Road on a Saturday morning. I thought if that worked then may as well try and replicate it.

Had a few different training partners this time round. This bloke dressed in black with the nickname of a washing machine was making a come back and was as keen as mustard to run... he looks like skeletor now this LG fellow! Managed to get Coalminer, Vince and a few others up in the hills.

I was injury free the early part of the campaign up until the dreaded 100 100s at AOP saw my hamstring go wack (which was in fact my back and not my hammy). Ended up managing this over the last 8 weeks of the campaign with weekly Osteopath treatment. I was fine on the slow stuff but any high speed reps had it flaring up and felt it in my second park run during the whole 5km race. Not ideal but it as long as I could put up with the discomfort it didn't seem to inhibit me too much.

Overall felt like I was flying along and getting through the weekly mileage quiet well. Had two weeks of 140km which was the most I have ever covered. In hindsight I reckon I did more kms when I ran my pb but not too many more. 6 or 7 runs of 30km+ with most of these in the hills plus many others in the high 20km range in the hills. Tried the 42.2km for the first time in training... not sure it helped or hindered. I reckon my hardest long run was actually on the flat one Friday morning. It was 35km on the Gardeners Creek trail before work and it would have been in the mid 20s when I started.

I did have one melt down this campaign. Cam home from work one night absolutely cooked. Was working until about midnight the night before and a full day the next day so was up at 5am for a run and also got to the tan for a session. When I got home Kathryn clearly could tell I was not looking great. At this stage I said to her, "this is the last time I am going to put myself through this". She thought I was joking. I was asleep at 6:30pm that night and three kids jumping on me couldn't even wake me up.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Just because you are training a lot doesn't correlate with travelling well. Did a Yassos a few weeks out from the marathon and it should have been better and easier but it wasn't. Did the Tilt 110 or whatever it is 3 weeks out and the day after a park run. Thought the 16:22 I ran with the back/hammy playing up running second behind Joji was a good run. However, the Tilt session the next day was a shocker... this should have been a warning sign but just put it down

to the 5km race the day before. Again I reflect back to my PB. Did the same session at the same time coming off a stomach flu and struggled not to crap myself the whole run but smashed it nonetheless... I was clearly travelling well in 2011.

Finished the training off well and had a 2 week taper. Some training highlights included:

- The ALs to Olinda 34km hill climb with a big crew (got through this really well and had me quietly confident).
- A brutal session with Smoothy in the hills where we did 33km including our usual 14km circuit twice.
- The track racing... still have NFI on how to go about racing this stuff but geez it is good fun. The Vicmilers meets I don't think are embraced enough by the MMM.
- The Bendigo Half MMM medal collection was good fun... particularly having the family there.
- A couple of park runs were also good fun.

The Days Before

Flew out very early Wednesday morning. The key to flying with young children is to go in the middle of the night so they sleep and you get some peace and quiet. Got to the hotel in Tokyo late afternoon on the Wednesday... great location right near Central station. Did a bit of sightseeing the days before... such an easy country to travel in. Friendly, Safe and sooooo efficient. My old man arrived on Friday before the race.

Caught up with the rest of the crew at the expo. We snuck in earlier to pick up the race kit as the kids were becoming a little jaded. I had only ever been to the Gold Coast race expo. Tokyo was like this on crack. It was insane. Loud, colourful and in your face like a Ryan Crowley tag. Was a little disappointed that the free Asahi they were handing out was alcohol free. A few butterflies the days before but was pretty relaxed and to be honest more excited than anything else... we were staying in the CBD of Tokyo and you could feel the build up. Would go to a café for something to eat and the staff would ask where we were from. When they found out I was there for the marathon they treated you like a hero. This was going to be huge.

Had a heap of good luck messages and phone calls in the lead up... much appreciated and you know who you are. AL again set up a tipping comp in the office for my target time.

Pre-race

Given the race didn't start until 9:10am I could wake up at a reasonable hour. Two slices of bread, a gel and some water. Get ready and try not wake up the family... fail miserably... not the first time that was going to happen today. Tape up the nipples and put the Vas on all the required places. Leave to hotel and get a train immediately... Sunday morning and you don't even need to wait 60 seconds for a train... I love Tokyo. A few race goers on the train. Arrive at the race start which is at Shinjuku. Follow the massive crowd to the start line. Sneak my way into a hotel lobby. Not meant to be there but given I am a westerner just walk in looking like I am with a travelling party. Hit the usual toilet stop and sit down and relax. The next part was a bit of a rush.

The security is up given Boston last year. Took a while to pass through the police bag check and then my bag drop was at the furthest possible point. With 36,000 others floating around this was doing my head in a bit. Drop my bag off and finally make my way back to my start area. Find Hutz, Rog and House here. See MJ too but he I keen for a leak and don't see him again until he flew past me at about 35km like I had my feet nailed to the road. Standing there for a while but I am loving it. We take off our long sleeves and House showed that he has an arm like Phil Tufnell throwing it to the volunteer. I am loving the atmosphere and again really not that nervous at all... Hutz on the other hand was as toey as a roman sandal.

The Race - First Half

Given the time lag with my report the race is all a bit of a blur. My plan (or ALs plan) was to run my own race but given the size and quality of the field find a group to run with. The plan – head out in 78:00 and hold on. Off we go. A walk shuffle to start with. This is very annoying. The elites have their start and then 3,000 dressed up Japanese club runners and then us. The first couple of kms was like playing frogga. Rog took off quickly and I wasn't far behind. First km was 4:00 minutes flat. Once the field cleared a bit I made this up fairly quickly as the down hill start resulted in a few 3:30 splits (or even quicker). 18:28 @ 3:42 pace for the first 5km officially.

Very early on my Garmin splits and km markers were clearly not in sync. Have to force my self to slow down during the first 10 kms and was cursing myself a bit but was able to establish a nice rhythm early. I am having a ball. Ran past a band playing the YMCA and I did this as I ran along. The atmosphere is electric. Remember seeing an Aussie bloke here and running with him for a bit. He was keen to break 2:40... I remember thinking that he had gone out too hard. After a chat I let him go and ran my own race thinking he was going to blow up big time. This was a nice part of the course running past the Imperial Palace. Official 5km split of 18:38 and 10km split of 37:06... smack on target. It was around here an American bloke came up alongside me for a chat. He asked what I was aiming for and I said I was looking at 2:37 or so. He thought I had gone out way too hard. I asked for his target time and he responded sub 2:30! I thought he had gone out too slow... clearly he was looking for a huge negative split.

Cannot really recall too much of the next 5km except for great support, atmosphere and scenery. As my garmin was out with the official km markers my splits were quicker than what I was actually travelling. This was fine as I was trying to run to feel but I sensed I was still going a bit quick. Having said that my next 5km split was a bit slower in 18:50. Happy with this and travelling very well at this point.

Got to the run where you start to run through the heart of the CBD of Tokyo. This is at about the 16km mark. All of a sudden a huge pack formed. This was perfect timing for me. As the buildings are tall and conditions overcast my garmin was all over the shop. At this point I decided to ignore it run to feel and run with the pack. I was feeling a million bucks at this point. Was running up the front a bit but forced myself to drop towards the back of the pack, get some cover and switch off. I was the only non Japanese runner in the pack and we also had a bloke who had a disability and didn't have any hands... he was cruising and was a crowd favourite. This is a great part of the course. Running through the heart of the city with a huge crowd cheering you on. Another official 18:50 for the 5km split. Went through half way in 78:00 flat... spot on and feeling great

The Race - Second Half

In terms of drinking I was grabbing a sports drink every 5km. They were cups so was hard to drink it all but managed to get enough in. Certainly wasn't too hot given it was about 5 degrees at race start. Having said that I do prefer the hand delivered drinks we get in Melbourne. Had a gel in my back zipped pocket, but the zip jammed and after a few attempts aborted the gel.

I remember around this stage thinking to myself that I have never felt this good in a marathon before. I told myself just to keep ticking them off and have a crack over the last 5km... the way I was feeling it was in my head that I could negative split. Mental note – never get ahead of yourself in a marathon.

Approaching the 23km mark I knew Kathryn, the kids and Dad would be there. Got a huge cheer as I passed them and gave them the thumbs up. Feeling great. Official 5km split was 19:08. Clearly slowing down a bit. Nothing disastrous. Having said that I didn't even know as I had given up with the Garmin and was running to feel.

At around the 25km was starting to feel a bit fatigued which was to be expected. To take my mind off it I started reciting all the Dr Seuss books I read to the kids in my head. I pretty much know all the words to "Oh the places you'll go", "Oh the things you can think", "The cat in the hat" etc etc. Geez your head does silly things during a marathon.

At about the 27km you do a big turn at the Asakusa temple. The crowd here is insane. I reckon it was 10 deep and they had these cardboard clapper things and the noise was unbelievable. Had a spring in my step here. Could see the Aussie bloke who I let go earlier coming back to me. I still felt like I was travelling well and on for a pb. In my head I was visualizing passing him, giving him some encouragement and kicking past him. As I was dragging back over the next few kms all of a sudden I started to feel crap. This was not a gradual onset but rather quite sudden. Official 5km split of 21:40 indicated that I was clearly about to enter a world of pain. I never got to the Aussie bloke.

Still at 30km I felt like I could dig deep and run a pb. 32km I use as an indicator. Got here in a tick under 2 hours. When I ran my pb got to the same place quicker and feeling a heap better. Still, I thought I could at least punch out 4 min kms for the last 10km. Very quickly I realised my body was in melt down and I was in the hurt locker. 32km and 33km according to my Garmin were 4 min splits. Saw Kathryn, the kids, Dad a bit after this, shrugged my shoulders and told them I was done. Kathryn looked very concerned. Next split was 4:34 and was getting slower.

This part really is a blur. The thing that stood out was that I felt like I needed to go to sleep. I very much struggled to keep my eyes open. Seriously felt like if there was a

bed on the side of the road I could jump in and fall asleep. This was a blow up of a different kind. It felt like my body was imploding. People were now passing me left right and center... I even got passed by a bloke in a Santa suit.

Reach 35km and there is a food station. I had never eaten in a marathon but the Japanese love their food. Thought it couldn't get much worse so grabbed some bits of banana. At this point there is a bit of a snow flurry... I feel a wry smile. MJ also flies past me at this point. A few kms later there is another food station. Go to grab some more bananas but in the tub next to them is m&ms! Stuff that... put the bananas back and grab two fists full of m&ms... I'm going to eat my way to the finish. At this point I am thinking Hutz will fly past me, however, clearly he has also had better days. There are three inclines to finish which is not ideal at the best of times let alone when you are cooked. At the 40km mark I check my watch and realise I have dug deep to run sub 2:48:48. I find a little, so much and no more. I rubber neck a few times to check if Hutz is mowing me down. It is a long finishing straight and also a little underwhelming for such a big event. Official time of 2:47:28 and 278th place... my worst marathon.

Cross the line. Thank f@#k that is over. There are blokes finishing in the same time who are over the moon. I am not annoyed at that point... just glad I finished. They put a towel around me straight away to keep me warm. Have a good chat with MJ who looks like he could go around again while I feel like I need a wheelchair. Cannot wait to see what MJ does when his body is right. Wait for House and Hutz who clearly has had better days. In a weird way it was also good to see House struggle a bit! Slowly shuffle to the exit, find the bags and found the American bloke... low and behold he wasn't surprised I blew up and I was not surprised he didn't go sub 2:30. He did mention that Chicago in his mind is the best course in the world... that is no real help to me at that point. MJ and myself head off to the train station and House and Hutz head back to their hotel. We have arranged to all meet later for drink, dinner and karaoke... what could possibly go wrong!

Post Race

On the train with MJ and made a comment that someone has done something to my phone as got a weird message from one of my mates (Shagger) saying he saw me race. I ignored it. Get back to the hotel... big hugs from the family and give the kids my medal. Quick bath (they didn't have a shower in our hotel room... not ideal when you are walking like the tin man) and out for lunch. Smash a few beers and relay the story about my SMS from Shagger. Dad tells me its true and he is in town. Give Shagger a call... I'm in shock to be honest... not often am I speechless. He didn't call out during the race as he didn't want to put me off my game. Arrange for him to join us for the festivities... this was going to be large.

The lunch and 3 Asahi's did not touch the sides... as Ray Warren would say it went down easier than a two dollar hooker. Headed back to the hotel to meet House and Shagger... Hutz and Rog decided to meet us later as they weren't feeling too crash hot. After much searching we find a bar for a drink... apparently bars don't open in downtown Tokyo before 5pm on a Sunday. Dad, House, Shagger and myself proceed to smash plenty of beers, dissect the Australian cricket team and debate who has the biggest leash... House or my Dad. Head back to the hotel to meet the others and then off for a great dinner expertly arranged by Natsuko. More Ashai. Off to karaoke (and fail) and drink more Ashai. Great night particularly sharing war stories with Hutz and Rog. Gerard clearly lapped up the atmosphere and MJ was just out for a jog! Leggo land was not much fun for me the next day.

Post Race Thoughts

The anger didn't set in for a few days... plus with 3 blow ups on the trot you get better at dealing with failure. There was something different this time... I knew that I was not going to race another marathon for a long time and possibly ever. 5 marathons in less than 4 years takes it out of you... mentally more than physically. In a way I was content despite the failure. A few nights later I was you tubing the footage AL put together from the 2011 Melbourne Marathon. Maybe that was me at my peak... 2:38. The only positive I am sort of taking out of the race was that I snuck under 2:48... have run 5 marathons all sub 4 minute pace. On the other hand, that somewhat rewards mediocrity.

The marathon takes you to a place that many other things cannot. I have learnt plenty over the last 4 years but it is very hard to actually put words to it. I am not sure what happened but what was different to this blow up than the previous two is that I felt my body breaking down... wanting to go to sleep and not being able to keep my eyes open for 10kms was weird. Got the official photos and there is barely one later in the race with my eyes open. I wasn't sick, had a great preparation and pulled up well. I am none the wiser. My training was as good as it could have been under the circumstances. I do believe I needed to do more tempo running. Why? Because I hate it. Would much prefer to do reps or fartlek. However, if you hate something that means it is a weakness and I don't think I trained it enough.

The course. I thought it was great. The start is painful and it would be really quick if you don't have the silly crowds. There were 3 inclines at the end but when you are as gone as I was it made no difference. The crowd was unbelievable. The Japanese are obsessed with the marathon. Every where I went for the days leading up to and the days after I was being asked about the marathon by the locals.

How good are the Milers. Great bunch to travel, run and drink with. Advice from experienced runners that have been there done that. The sledging, the banter and the genuine want for you to succeed. Running is such an individual sport but being a Melbourne Midday Miler makes you feel part of a team. Each and every Miler has played some part in my marathon experiences and I thank you all. Special mention to Gerard and Natsuko for all the planning preparations. Great fun travelling, eating and drinking with House, Hutz, Dave and MJ. If it wasn't for these people I would not have fulfilled my dream of completing a big marathon overseas. Thank you. Also a special mention to AL... very handy working with a bloke who loves planning a marathon.

Where to from here? I have been in a very good paddock and now 7kgs heavier. I will not be racing a marathon anytime soon... possibly never again. The best part is I feel great for not caring as much. Currently getting out for 50kms a week. Nothing better than heading out for a run with no Garmin, no schedule, no stress. I am closer to heading down the AL path of golf than I am to racing in another marathon. If I do race another marathon House suggested (and he might be right) that it could be after a 180km bike ride ☺.

Thanks

My wife Kathryn and kids Lucy, Will and Jane. Could not have been more supportive. We have 3 kids under 8 and it was pure selflessness on Kathryn's behalf that allowed me to embark on not only this marathon but also the four previous. It makes the pain of ballsing up a marathon a lot easier to deal with. We had a great experience and all up spent 4 weeks in Japan. Tokyo was awesome, Disneyland

crazy and Kyoto has to be the most peaceful beautiful place on the earth. It was also great to have Dad and Shagger fly over for the journey.

To the Milers that have offered support and emails over the last few years and marathon running advice it has not gone unnoticed... It is a hell of a lot easier to get a marathon right when you have experience like this around you.





