

May 1st 2011

How smart is it anyway to register for a half marathon just three weeks after the Marathon of Rotterdam? That one was a real struggle, weather way too warm, no wind at all and to many elbow-pushing middle aged man annoying me. I like running, but to be honest, I don't like running in Europe too much. Everyone that runs there considers himself a real athlete and doesn't care at all about the people running before, behind or next to them. An with 22,000 registered participants in Rotterdam, of which 80% male and the majority in the ages between 40 and 45, well, the 26.2 miles track sometimes looked more like a battlefield than a running course where people want to be running just for the fun of it. That's what I like about running in the USA.

Since I did my first run in St. George Utah in March 2010, I'm trying to schedule a run around all business trips I make to the states. The St. George run was a great primer anyway, on a sunny Saturday (people up there don't like to run on Sunday), the run started in Snow Canyon and descended the mountain to arrive in a St. George suburb 10 K's later. On that first run already I noticed that in the USA, the majority of participants is female, and not between 40 and 45, but more like between 20 and 30. The kind of women that run because they want to stay beautiful for as long as they can. And hey, I don't complain about the sight of it. Running behind a female athlete is much better than running behind a 43 year European running man in tights.

My second run in the USA was in Las Vegas, December 2010. It was a half marathon, and I was so smart to run it just the day after arriving. Facing nine hour time difference, and the dry and warm desert air, it wasn't the easiest run I've ever made, but the audience really made up for that. Cheering people, clapping their hands for every runner that passes by, and not like in the Paris marathon for example where the spectators are just interested in the people they know and don't give a shit about anybody else.

So I registered for the Wallis Sands half marathon. Not particularly because I've always wanted to go to Wallis Sands, but because it's just a convenient hour North of Boston where I have to be for work the rest of the week. Half Marathon on Sunday, my flight from Amsterdam came in on Saturday. The weather wasn't terrific at Logan Airport, and it didn't get much better driving up North to Wallis Sands. In fact, there were no leaves on the trees yet, like if Winter just has left the area a few weeks ago. On the beach of Wallis Sands it was even cold, not much more than about 50 degrees Fahrenheit, with a strong wind blowing from the Ocean. Like if it came directly from the icebergs of Greenland. I picked up my bib and checked in at the hotel, where at 7 PM it started to feel like 1 AM (which was completely true, if you wake up in European time, no matter where you are at the end of the day, the body will still be in European time.)

Amongst the disadvantages of time travel, is that the first night somewhere else I tend to wake up extremely early. That was also the case today, where I first woke up at 1 AM. I've had two very regular weeks, waking up every morning between 6 AM and 7 AM - 6 for the time difference, so it made complete sense for me to wake up that early. With a headache of course, which is also quite normal. Fortunately, I managed to stay in the state between being asleep and awake until 3 AM and then I got out of bed. Long time ago that used to stress me, but I've done this enough to know you can't do anything about it anyway, so I got out of bed and had three fantastic productive hours of work. That's amongst the benefits of being self-employed, there's never time to get annoyed.

At 6 AM I had my extremely healthy runners breakfast - very important on the day of a race: blueberries, muesli and blueberry yogurt (I happen to like blueberries). I had a lot of that, but for some reason, two hours later I was hungry again, so I added the free hotel breakfast, which for a free hotel breakfast is quite good. After breakfast I walked out of the hotel to feel the temperature, which was quite a shock. I've been spoiled with 13 degrees Centigrade (about 50 degrees Fahrenheit) in the morning the last couple of weeks, so the about 40 degrees Fahrenheit I felt here were quite a shock. The good thing though was that there was a clear blue sky with not one single cloud, it promised to be a beautiful day today. So I decided to dress light anyway: shorts, t-shirt and a light wind-jacket that I normally put on on a day like this.

The drive from the hotel to the Wallis Sands beach was gorgeous. To be honest, I'm more a far-West kind of man. I like the red rocks in the desert, and the emptiness you'll find in states like Utah and Arizona. And I was a little frustrated that the Red Hat conference that I'm attending this year is organized in Boston and not in Flagstaff Arizona, but like I always do when I come over, I add a day to do fun stuff and this time I had to spend that day in New England. Such a pleasant surprise. No leaves on the highest trees yet, but blossom season. Trees with yellow blossom, white blossom, pink blossom, the well maintained wooden houses against the deep blue sky of the morning sun, surrounding by beautiful blossoms in a landscape made up of water, meadows, woods and as the finishing touch a bit of rock. I had never expected New England to be this beautiful.

I arrived at the traffic mess at the start at 9 AM, just the moment that the walkers (yeah, some people actually wanted to walk the 13.1 miles) walked out. The parking area was already completely filled up, so I parked road side. I didn't mind anyway to park on the road side, because normally it's not much fun driving out of a parking where hundreds of other cars want to get out as well and there's just one exit where at the same time the runners are coming in!

There was a total of just 1,000 participants, fortunately, because 1,000 is a crowd that is manageable. I spent my time by going to the toilet, making a walk and going to the toilet again. I did not understand why, but I felt in good shape today. That might be because coming back to the US starts to feel like coming back home, I've been coming here for seven years in a row now, between four and seven times a year and I just like being here. I just liked being at the Wallis Sands half marathon this morning as well. And the toilets, well, that's a normal ritual. An hour before the run, I normally drink half a liter. That takes half an hour before it wants to get out again. And the lines before the porta-potties normally take between 15 and 20 minutes, so it happens more than once that before a race I do nothing but lining up. It's important not to need a toilet break during the race. Especially on this one. This is the USA and they will probably throw you in jail for not using a toilet if you need to go (something that is completely accepted in Europe where men use to do their thing just about anywhere, if you're unlucky and live in the center of Amsterdam even against your house).

Like most sports events in the US, this one also started with the national Anthem, a sacred moment that always gives me the chills, like it did with everybody else. After that, the race started. I seemed to be a bit too much in the front, because the first fifteen minutes or so everyone seemed to be passing me by, even if I was running a rather respectable 4.45 min/km (7.05 min/mile) (the target for this race was to do 5.30 min/km (8.30 min/mile). I had a very good reason to be slow, since the marathon my left knee is annoying me. Even after a stupid 10K run, it hurts when I walk down the stairs and I didn't want to force anything.

But the circumstances were just perfect. The annoying cold wind from the ocean was like a turbo-oxygen boost, I did not have any problem breathing, I wasn't too warm, neither too cold (even without the jacket that I took off before the start), and there were beautiful women everywhere around me. After two miles things slowed down a bit,

and I was running amidst the same people for a while already. I noticed something I had never seen before: only women! next to me a Latina woman, in front of me a short blond one with a pink shirt and a running skirt (did I already mention that I like looking at running skirts?) and just behind me two girls that just didn't stop talking and I just wanted to keep up with this small group. It will take a while before I see something like that in Europe, so I kept up at a respectable pace of 5.06 min/km. I didn't even stop for drinks (I normally walk a few steps to drink my water). The situation was just perfect, the people around me, the people cheering for every single runner that passed by, even the ones they didn't know, the beautiful landscape, the perfect temperature, it just all fits.

Between the start and mile 2, we followed the coastline, between mile 2 and 9 (I think), we were running in the beautiful hinterland, and from mile 9 on, the course followed the coast line again, straight against the wind. I thought of the wind in the Canyonlands half marathon I ran in March, which was dry and slowing me down, but this wind was like breathing pure energy, it made me faster. So I left the beauties around me (well, some of them had magically disappeared already anyway), to find that there were men running anyway. The faster I ran, the more men I found around me, and the old European-run frustration of running behind a man in tights came to annoy me again, which made me even faster. The last four miles I felt like flying, especially when I could hear the speaker at the finish line, announcing names of the people that finished. He didn't mention mine though, I don't think there is one single American capable of pronouncing my name more or less correctly, but I didn't really mind, I finished the race in 1.46:51, the fastest Half Marathon I've ran since March 2010, just three weeks after the Marathon of Rotterdam, and not even 24 hours after arriving in America. I didn't even care that they didn't hand out medals (I love having medals), but the memory of this perfect run was so much stronger than the most beautiful medal. I felt like a hero, and that was confirmed by all the people cheering and clapping at the finish line.

Even when I walked back to my car, the runners that were still coming in and should have saved their breath to make a sprint to the finish line congratulated me with my great job. Once more I know why the USA feels like home more and more. Thank you America, see you next week for the big lake half marathon, just 40 miles from here.