

Big Lake, May 7th 2011

So what can you do if the flight back home only leaves at 4.55 in the afternoon? Run a half marathon of course! I'd been lucky on this trip to Boston, two half marathons in a week, both driving distance from Boston. Wallis Sands last week was adorable, and today they had planned the Big Lake half Marathon, about an hour and a half North of Boston and it conveniently started at 8 AM.

As this was the last day of my week in the Boston Area, and the flight back to Amsterdam is only a short flight, I really wanted to sleep well, so I took a sleeping pill at 7 PM yesterday evening, with the purpose of having an excellent night of sleep. Well, excellent it was. I hibernated at 8.20, only to wake up twenty minutes past 5 in the morning. That was very late, given the fact that my average wake-up time this week had been more like 3 AM. Fortunately, I'm used to prepare and leave in half an hour, so I ate my breakfast in a rush, shaved and got myself into the car for the 45 minute drive.

Leaving the hotel in Portsmouth it was a nice 52 Fahrenheit, but during the ride up in the hills temperature dropped and dropped up to the level of just 40 when I parked my car near the bib-pickup location in the local high school. I looked up my bib number and since I registered using my full first name (Alexander, not Sander), the lady that gave me the bib warmly said "Welcome Alex, and good luck with the race".

The weird thing about this half marathon, was that it is a loop, but start is a mile and a half before the finish. I wanted to be sure to get back on time, so I didn't want to take my chances on getting the bus from the Finish line back to start, and drove my car up to the Finish, to park it right there, not much more than a hundred yards from the Finish line. Now that's what I call convenient! And I still had time enough to walk back to the start.

Amongst the first things I noticed, is that this really is friendly country: every single person I met greeted me with a friendly good morning! The race itself was organized as a small-scale race, with approximately 1,000 runners. Just the kind of race I like, because with a thousand runners there's no need for an elbow-battle in the first couple of miles.

I still was back at the start line largely in time, with more than 45 minutes left. Excellent for the pissing routine. As I had been drinking half a liter of sports drink 1.15 hour before start, that needed to come out. The strange thing is that it doesn't get out all at once, so I lined up for the toilet to empty my bladder, walked for ten minutes and lined up for the toilet again. If you've ever been at the start of a race like this, you probably know why, the average queuing time for restrooms half an hour before start is twenty minutes. So that gave me a perfect pass-time before the race started.

However, the maths for this race were different, and I still felt an urge to go at the moment they played the national anthem. That seemed to have a special meaning today, now that the seals have killed Osama just a few days ago. I was proud to be part of this small ceremony, where most runners put a hand on their chests and the people all cheered at the end of the anthem. Not a bad idea to do this at sports events, it makes every American feel like an American, even the non-Americans like myself even feel themselves a part of this great nation. Funny to see how the people of the USA have succeeded in something that we back home in the Netherlands have failed completely. Since this already was my fifth race in the USA, I noticed that something was different. Normally, I expect an about 75% female participation, which wasn't the case at this race. It seemed more like 50/50, and the "I know I can do it" kind of runner seemed to be completely absent. Yeah, I know, can't judge anyone by appearance, but let's admit, the physics of the average runner is a bit different from the physics of the wannabee runner. It looked like most of the runners here were people that had been doing some races before.

During the first two miles, I didn't really figure out why. The road was gentle, with a little hill occasionally, but nothing really serious. Friendly people all along the road, cheering and clapping for every single runner and a perfect organization with no less than seven drinking post. My personal favorite was the second one, where about six military looking men shouted like drill sergeants: "Water here, Gatorade is next!!!" I don't think these guys have had many people that dared refusing a refreshment from them!

The race started to get more serious at about mile four, when the road went up and down and up again and down again, rolling like the waves on a nice summer day on the beach. A nice summer day it looked like today. The bright shining sun made it quite warm, nothing like the almost freezing temperatures at the start this morning and I was happy there was some shadow as well. But still, the highest point in the race only was about 200 feet above the lowest point, but for a run that starts to feel like real hills. After gradually running up the second hill, the real surprise came when getting down from that hill: the road was really steep, with a descent that I estimate about 20%, to go all the way down to lake level.

That was also where the real fun started: at the lake level, there were many little hills, not much higher than between 15 and 30 feet, but there were so many of them! With every next hill, the following one looked higher and higher. I also noticed that I'd left most people behind, my guess is that out of the 1,000 runners I was between the fastest 150 of them. It was very tough though, I even started refusing the drinks that were offered. With an average heart rate of 159 BPM, the body was too busy to worry about drinking, and I didn't even accept the drinks from the very friendly and motivated old people at mile 9. "Thanks but no thanks people!"

The last two miles were flat, and that's where a runner can really find out what he's worth. The funny thing about running hills - even small ones like this, is that going up tends to break your pace and going down, you risk going too fast, which brings an even bigger fatigue, with the result that you are completely empty after having a few of those hills. Now that's probably why the average participants on this run seemed more experienced than those at last weeks run. Lucky enough, I still had some energy left when the road started to flatten down.

On the last two miles, I managed to drop the average 5.00 minutes/km to 4.58 m/km and ran faster and faster, even dropping my average to 4.57 at the finish line. It felt like a relieve to see the crowd, waiting and cheering at the finish line and there even was a speaker that announced every single runner that came in. "And there we have Alex van Hugt from Roesendale Alebama!" Yeah right, Alebama Alex. Don't know why he thought I was from Alabama, but who cares. A nice 1.45:40 finish time, fourth in my personal half marathon rank since I've started running. And the good thing about this race? Apart from yet another perfect organization and free beer and pizza for the arriving runners (which I kindly refused), this run did have a medal! And what a delight to find my car at just 100 yards from the finish line! Sitting in the Delta lounge at Boston Logan airport, I realize that I probably will sleep well tonight!