



[Home](#)

[Life](#)

[Running](#)

[Photos](#)

[Musings](#)

[Home](#) > [Running](#) > [Race Reports](#)

PJ HALF MARATHON by Jamie Pang

A 21K provides ample opportunity for things to go South...

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Introduction

Never before had the event been so heavily promoted, what with the 50th Anniversary of PJ. I was a little apprehensive of this event given my previous bad experience with the race organization. Without dwelling into the specifics, suffice to say that I stayed away from the race for 5 years.

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5 years equals 5 attempts to smooth out the kinks of event organization and should provide adequate opportunities to turn this big ticket annual into a well-oiled event. So I signed up. In any case, it was to be a 21K leading to the SG Marathon and should prove a good gauge on my performance over that event. The use of waxed paper as the bib (albeit an oversized one) served me some optimism. The move from the kerosene-stench cloth bib is most welcome.

Preparation

My longest training run was 15K and this aside, my last attempt at the 21K distance was some years ago but I was confident of finishing with a good time lining up at the start. For this race, I carried 2 Powergels - Tropical Fruit and Chocolate (with caffeine) - in a small and light Nike pouch. My [Mizuno](#) Precision 3's with adidas socks, adidas Response vest and Asics shorts complete my loadup. On the food end, I went through 2 home-cooked pasta dinners over the final week, [Twinlab](#) Carbo Fuel drinks over the final 2 nights, [Shaklee Performance](#) drink the eve of the race.

It was lights out at 9.30pm after my son drifted off to the Hundred Acre Wood to play with Tigger.

On race morning, with this being a 21K, I had some cereal with some chocolate drink at home. Reaching the event area, I downed a banana PowerBar with some Performance and plain water so as not to cause stomach cramps. This would prove to be advantageous as I didn't encounter any cramps. Since I forgot to print out the pacing band, I had to write down the target splits on my arm.

The Start

The 21K field wasn't that large and I started comfortably. Those of us who spotted a young boy striding with the group were amazed. He couldn't have been more than 12 years of age! At one point I caught a glimpse of the elites on the other side of the road, not surprisingly, 5 out of 8 in front were Indians.



The First Grouse

We passed the first round-a-bout with nary a Traffic Police or City Council Authority personnel in sight. Thankfully a car and a bus stopped for us. This was to be a recurring problem over 80% of the route. Runners were jostling with the many rude drivers for space. In the course of the run, I found myself running behind a garbage truck and next to

countless buses (with their exhaust fumes and disembarking passengers), and avoiding appallingly rude drivers.

The First 5K

I felt great during this part of the race. I reminded myself to curb my urge to increase my pace. I restrained myself to just making a surge now and then and was generally keeping a constant pace.

The Next Grouse

No mile markers. As simple as that. Forget it if you're looking forward to pacing yourself. We could still use the sponging stations and water stations as markers but should the organizers located them elsewhere or at irregular intervals, the runners can forget it all the same.

The Next 5

Still very comfortable, I was passing quite a few runners here as the 21K runners are now merging and mingling with the 5 and 10K runners coming from another direction. On the opposite side of the Federal Highway, I could see the 10K race leaders flying past. At approximately the 8K mark and approaching the water station, I downed my first gel pack, followed by a cup of 100 Plus (non-carbonated) and a cup of brownish colored water (in case you don't know the Selangor Water Authority is famous for providing poor quality water). This was where I hit the first incline, a flyover that was to take us past the Motorola plant. The traffic at this tricky intersection was poorly controlled with the police only controlling traffic for the 10K runners heading back to the finishing point. I had to speed up and negotiate a patch between 2 stopping cars. I let out a shout in anger at this.

I next passed many factory workers who giggled at the sight of the runners. If you're looking to claps or cheers of encouragement here, forget it. If you're the type whom can feast off the energy of giggles, good for you. I just focused on my pace and keep the distraction away for this is where the battle begins for a 21K.

A check at my watch showed that I was making good time - 56:50 at 10K approximately (no distance markers, remember?). Up to this point, I was already trading position many times with a fellow Pacesetter.

More To Come

It was business as usual until the water station after the MAS training center. As this was a long incline and with time on my side, I relaxed here a bit and walked for about 150 meters, taking my time to drink up. Turning the bend I then joined the Federal Highway once more taking us back to the Finish. The sun was already bearing down on us and the traffic too was getting much heavier. Again, the authorities could have done a better job managing traffic.

The Straw That Broke The Camel's Back

Seeing the next water station from a distance, I slurped down the last packet of gel. This was my first experience with a chocolate flavored gel and it actually tasted quite good. Unfortunately any hopes of a much needed swig of fluids were dashed. Instead, we were greeted by the boy scouts and girl guides manning the station calling out that there was no more water and we are to get them at the next station. Someone should tell them that the next station is the finishing point. And we're somewhere at the 13K point! No water for another 8K in a hot and dusty environment is rather unthinkable especially for an event of this distance and magnitude. I tried gamely to shuffle along, by this time just quite happy to make it to the finish. I was also falling behind my targetted time.

At this juncture not many runners were passing me and neither did I pass many. Those of us there at that time were struggling and were alternating running and walking, trading leads. At the next sponging station we were told not to drink the water. I just didn't care and just squeezed the water

My run-walk routine continued until the last 2K where I met up with the boy (oh, I didn't tell you he passed me before the 5K mark?). He looked beat and cursed along with me on the water issue. The Pacesetter I was trading lead with was also done in by the lack of hydration - after passing him some distance back, he didn't come back to me.

Approaching the finishing line, I heard the gun went off signalling the end of the certificate qualifying time which was 2:15 (I clocked in at 2:15:40). By this time I couldn't give a damn and just cruised home. The official indicated that I just missed the cutoff but again I was just to upset to care.

Not The End Of The Story

I then stayed a while near the finish line to spot the boy coming in. It was simply a fantastic performance by him, never mind the time. Looking forward to some drinks, I walked over to the drink tent and joined up the queue. To our dismay, there was no more water, not a drop of bottled water nor 100 Plus left. The cups on the table were empty and

the persons in charge of the stations were just looking on sheepishly.

Race Post-Mortem

The race started out well but I was derailed by event inadequacies too numerous to mention. This serves to confirm the state of road running events in this country (you can read my [rant here](#)). Basic needs of the runners were not provided and like an observer commented, this event did not seem to want to encourage the average runners to finish. I made a decision not to support this event from next year onwards. At 2:15, this was to be my worst 21K ever. Consolation was that I was able to put in a 21K training run. I also made a mental note that I should use this set back to train harder for the Singapore Marathon. This will not offset my marathon debut plans!

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Sept 2003