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**SINGAPORE MARATHON** by Jamie Pang

Ready or not, there's no turning away from the most anticipated event of the year!

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**"To describe the agony of a marathon to someone who's never run it is like trying to explain colour to someone who was born blind."**

Jerome Drayton

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So there I was at the starting line. After all the months of training, early morning rises, reducing unhealthy food, I was about to test myself on how far I can go. Kevin and his Dad had picked me up at 4:45am and we got to the stadium after a very short drive. This was after I got into a standoff with a mad neighbourhood dog when I stepped outside Patrick's apartment. It was a tense moment but he probably got excited by my new scent and the fact that I was garbed in a bin bag. By the time we arrived at the National Stadium, the place was already alive with runners, volunteers and officials. There were at least 30 porta-johns in a row ensuring a sufficient number of last minute calls for runners. This is an improvement from previous years' race where this was an issue - 1st evidence of the effort the organizers put in to listen to feedback. I had toilet paper in my pouch just in case.

2nd improvement is the race start time which was moved to 6am from 2002's 6:30am. Kevin and I wandered around the area and took some shots you can see below. After which I surrendered my bag to the baggage handlers waiting by their trucks. To enable efficient handling the baggage trucks are sorted to ranges in bib number and mine, being 100, was for the 1st truck.



Calm before the storm (or pain!)



You have to be there to feel the electricity. Truly an International Class event! This was when the event and pacing cars get ready in front of the runners. At this point the runners are all still at the car park area warming up



One of the Passats passing thru the starting line. Note the "Sub 3 hours" board on the road divider railing. This was where the sub 3 hour folks lined up. The 4 to 5 hour folks (where I was) were further behind.

Kevin then spotted his friends and we anchored ourselves to a spot. While he chatted with them, I try to relax and stretch a bit. By now the atmosphere was building up with the MC and advisor repeating advice to start slow and keep hydrated. Nearby a tent was supplying unlimited bottles of Polar mineral water and Sportade isotonic. I grabbed 1 of each and settled down to wait. The MC was counting down every 10 minutes and this added to the tension. However, I was still in a stupor as a result of insufficient rest. Then it was time to proceed to the starting blocks. Sub 3 hour runners were in front, followed by 3 to 4 hours then the 4 to 5 hours folks. Further back were those in the 21K and 10K categories. It was then that I saw Lay and we wished each other good luck. He was walking back towards the 4 hour section and then I decided to go after him as Lay's pace is more realistic compared to Kevin's who was in the 3 to 4 hour section. However I lost Lay in the crowd. From my position I can only see a sea of heads and balloons. The crowd was mostly subdued - probably nervous. I reminded myself of my 2 goals: 1) To finish strongly and 2) To complete in 4:30. Not long after that, the air horn went off and everyone let out a cheer. But due to the crowd, nobody around me was running yet. Did I mention that there was a runner dressed up as a jailbird and another in a tux?

**"Men, today we die a little."**

Emil Zatopek, on the starting line for the Olympic Marathon

It took me 5 minutes before I passed the starting line and I made sure I stepped on the mat and started my watch. At that time I still felt a little blur, not very excited and just tried to plod along. I must still be exhausted from the previous night's excursion and have not recovered fully from previous weeks' illness. Nevertheless, I thought my long runs were sufficient to take me through even if I didn't meet my goal time. Not even 5 minutes into the race and I could feel the humidity. Despite the cloudy and cool weather, Singapore is indeed more humid than KL, since it's nearer to the equator and I was already sweating. Then we runners saw a couple in a middle of a wedding photoshoot. Both were locked in a kiss and many runners were cheering for them. The cheeky ones even reminded the groom that his turn was up and it was now our turn for the kiss! A funny moment. An odd time for a photoshoot but I guess the couple wanted the runners in the background. Then to my surprise, Ken (the Pacesetter's man-machine) ran past me shouting "Looking good!" I didn't see him at the start and he must have started from way back.

The early miles meandered along city streets before heading out to the East Cost Park (ECP). The sky was still dark and the terrain consistently flat. Even though I was slightly behind my targeted pace, I was not too worried as I intended to run negative splits and there were plenty of time and miles to catch up. Better to conserve. Nothing much happened and I hydrated at all stations and I was very glad to note that the distance markers were present at every kilometre. We could even see the markers on the opposite side where the returning runners were on, so we could tell how far we had to go before the U-turn. Nice touch.

It was only at the 10K mark before I was awake. And when that happened, I felt a rush of exhilaration. It was then that it dawned upon me that I was indeed running a marathon! Gee whiz! By the 12K mark it was already much brighter. I could identify the runners all around me. Many expats, races (though surprisingly not many Indians), build and sizes. Many were in triathlon suits, many men were shirtless, quite a few donned Oakleys, many women runners were in sports

bras. There were old and young ones, skinnies and beefcakes. I even spotted the PJ Half kid in the later miles. The kid was amazing but perhaps foolhardy - such a young body should not be subjected to the stress of the marathon. With sunlight, the supporters were out in full force - the Runspirators and Spirits on the Course. School cheer teams were banging away in band attires, in pom-poms, what have you.

Somewhere before 18K, my left small toe started to give some blister problems. This happened even though I had Vaseline'd all my toes. The left sole too started to feel like having a sand paper rubbed against it. This never happened in training before and as a precaution I adopted a run/walk strategy to see if it went away. Soon I passed the 21K finishing point and I couldn't help but felt jealous that those folks have completed their "work" and we still had such a long way to go. The scenery at ECP in the early morning was beautiful. There were many campers and strollers. Some bikers and roller bladers were following us along their trail.

Then the route returned back to the City and there were a few short gradual climbs over a couple of bridges and I was already 15 minutes off pace due to the worsening discomfort of both my feet. The sun was already up but luckily it wasn't that hot yet due to some cloud covers. Traffic management was good and there were plenty of CISCO and regular police at road junctions. The blister became quite bad after that and besides dousing myself at every water stop, I had also resorted to stretching my calves.

Before long I reached the most beautiful location of the race - the Marina Promenade stretch. Running/walking so close (in some sections) to the edge of the sea wall was great with the splashing waves from the passing Coast Guard boats. Supporters were thick here especially nearing the Esplanade. Seeing them cheer you on, you just had to keep running. Unfortunately it was also at this stage that my back began to trouble me. It felt like a vice was clamping shut, squeezing tighter and tighter. The bad news was the pain had just started to build up.

My spirits were lifted briefly when I reached the Parliament/Padang area. Already I could hear the music and cheers. Runners pushing through their final 500 meters were just on the opposite side of the road! I was that physically close to the finish line but I had 12K more to go! Shit! Even at that point (about 3:30 split) my pacing was not that far off from my target. Theoretically I could still hit the last 12K in 1:15 and finish in 4:45. So riding on the second wind and the cheers of the crowds, I ran the 31st K in 6.39. It was slightly downhill and straight all the way (Shenton Way). Then I ran into despair.

Turning the corner at the end of the 31K, I found myself reaching a slope. I had to slow to a stop and took the opportunity to take a leak in the roadside bush. Only in a road race could you piss, spit and litter in Singapore or anywhere in the world. Is running great or what? It's such an empowering event and experience. However there may be a price to be paid too. On the opposite side of the road a medical team was loading a runner into an ambulance. He or she was just 2.5K from the finish line. A casualty.

This 1 to 1.5K of the route seemed to be undulating. I later learnt that the Marina Way and Marina South areas were reclaimed lands and will be developed into the future Manhattan of Singapore. I thought it to be a waste of greenery because the park in this area is huge and it would have been a pity to level all these trees. In any case, at that point the sun shone in all its full glory. With me already reduced to walking, it was time to shake and bake - shake the head while being baked in the sun! Nearly everyone around and opposite me were already in this mode - it was a matter of survival and no longer a question of finishing time. The marathon is a great equalizer. Regardless of your build, size or race the marathon will humble you, to quote Frank Shorter. Everyone there was in pain - triathletes, skinny runners, fat and blubbery runners, topless men, bra women (many with nipples showing through their wet top)...everyone. I was in a daze and I couldn't even recall when I last took my PowerGel, and only barely remembering to keep taking my time splits. I noted that many wore the wrong type of shoes (refer to Learnings section below).



Then I heard some people shouting my name and looking up I saw Geraldine, Ben and Gang. They made it to the race after all and it was a real surprise. They screamed and shouted and took many shots which will show me in my ugliest form, I guarantee that. I was lifted a bit, embarrassed but felt like a million bucks. I commented to them that with the pain I was in, my sex life would be ruined forever. Then I caught Kevin on the opposite side of the road - he was walking too. He was ahead of me by 2 to 3K and should finish around 4:30ish. We both gave each other words of encouragement and went on. After Kevin, I saw Lay who said that I was doing great and to keep it up. Then I saw Lawrence but he didn't recognize me - probably also in a daze as I was. Finally I passed a fellow Pacesetter who was also struggling. I told him about my back and he said to be careful and to take it easy so that there won't be lasting injury.

<<Left: Some welcomed company in the final 4K

Returning the way I came the last 3K, I couldn't take the pain anymore and took a paracetamol tablet. That eased the back pain a lot so much so that I could run a bit and also did some power walking. Geraldine and Gang were still there and I informed them to wait for me at the finish line. There were still many many runners/walkers behind me, and I can't help but felt for them. We're the Legion Of The Walking Wounded. These final miles took so much out of us - it wasn't so much the distance, but the meandering route hammered the mind and will by making it seemed never ending. I did 3 power walking Ks in 9.43, 9.10 and 7.38. It was here that I fell into a conversation with another runner. I didn't get his name but he said that he was 42 and hadn't run many marathons before and that he was only doing this year's in memory of his friend. What a noble cause. I then continued my fast walking and reached the spot where the earlier runner was loaded into an ambulance. That meant that I had only 2.5K to go. So I got back into a limping-run mode. Some volunteers who were handing out PowerGels shouted that there were 2K left to go.

**"I am too tired, even to be happy."**

Gelindo Bordin, Italy, immediately after winning the Seoul Olympic Marathon

Turning around the Parliament I was finally on the home stretch. There were markers showing 100m to go, 75m to go, 35m to go leading to the finish line. There were no runners within 100m in front of me and I had all the crowd support and cheers. I ran in the middle of the road to soak the atmosphere up from both sides and the people there wildly cheered me on - I was slow and could see their faces. Their enthusiasm wasn't put on and I applauded them too and I ran on to the mat and past the finish in 5:32 (gun time 5:37, placed 1342 out of 2175 finishers). I was way off my target time by more than 1 hour due to the total 9K of walking. The Wall did me in. I didn't feel any elation nor joy then, just very relieved that it was over. The friendly voice and face of Ken was on the sideline and we shook hands. He said that I did very well to finish. At that point, I didn't feel that way. Then a volunteer garlanded me with the medal and took a photo. It was quite hot now and I made my way to the chip surrender booth to claim my NB Finisher T-Shirt. I tried to look for Kevin but later found out that he had to rush off (he ran a very good 4:30 race, placing 534 - [read his race report](#)). While waiting for the post-race massage two thoughts ran through my mind: 1) I must have walked about 9K in total and 2) I prayed that I would get the girl massagers. One runner in the queue told me that his toe nails would be dropping off within the next few days. Lay (5:12 placing 1068) and Lawrence (5:23 placing 1162) saw me and came over to congratulate me. They were returning to KL that afternoon itself.

My dream came true. I was summoned by the girl team! The 2 girls were sports medicine students at the Alexandria Hospital and besides being attractive, they were pretty good too. While I laid on the table, they wiped off the sweat and dirt from my legs and proceeded to apply some oil and massage cream. They worked and kneaded my calves, hamstrings (until just before the backside), ankles before turning me over for the quads and shins. If you thought that was turning me on, you thought wrong! It was painful...but in a nice way because they were very gentle on me. I told them that my lower back hurt and they offered to do my back as well. What a bonus!

Back at Patrick's, I showered in cold water to aid recovery and limped out for some lunch nearby. The stomach has shrunk after such a considerable physical effort so I couldn't finish my rice but the hot soup rejuvenated me a little. Returning to the apartment, I looked over my battle scars. My feet and toes were pretty beat up.



Battle scars. Skin were peeling and my left sole was burning from the abrasion

The NB Finisher T-Shirt logo

So what do I think about the marathon? I think it's every bit it has been written about it. The drama, the personal battle with emotions and pain, its difficulties are all to be experienced to be appreciated. Every marathoner is an inspiration him/herself and has a story to tell. Why do I do it? It's a mixture of wanting to test myself, to experience the distance and to experience the effort. The Singapore experience has been tremendous for me - an execution of superb race organization (not faultless but getting there). To see technology at work in sports, just check out the [Online Post Race Analyses](#) of my performance. Am I game for more? You bet! Next marathon: Penang, June 2004!

**"The marathon is a charismatic event. It has everything. It has drama, It has competition. It has camaraderie. It has heroism. Every jogger can't dream of being an Olympic champion, but he can dream of finishing a marathon."**  
the late Fred Lebow, former Race Director of NYC Marathon

**"In this mechanized society of ours, marathoners want to assert their independence and affirm their individuality more than ever. Call it humanism, call it health, call it folly. Some are Lancelots, some are Don Quixotes. All are noble."**  
Eric Segal

#### Learnings:

1. Vaseline everywhere, duct tape the soles, and powder the area. Only duct tape works as it's thick enough. The rest will just peel off. Important to keep the feet dry
2. Rest fully the day before. If sightseeing is a must, do it the day after the race. Better to limp window shopping than to suffer during the race
3. If you feel slow starting out, go slower. The distance has a tendency to exert undue confidence, leading to potential "hara-kiri"
4. Respect the distance but don't fear it - instead really train for it...and pray hard
5. Do more 30Ks and do a few 35Ks to build body/mind of steel for the later miles. To increase toughness, insert hills in the last miles
6. Stay healthy especially towards the final 2 weeks (any illness can be detrimental to all the hard work already put in)  
In the final 2 weeks, continue to run albeit in tapering mode to maintain a sense of pacing
7. Strengthen the back. The legs are not the only part that are being pounded
8. Wear the correct and appropriate footwear according to your physical ability. Only wear racers if you finish under 3 hours. Finishers between 3 to 4 can benefit from performance trainers. Finishers beyond 4 hours should rely on shoes with better cushioning and support. Even though they're heavier, your legs and back will thank you for it.

#### Positives:

1. Great to have carried painkillers along. It helped tremendously
2. The waist pouch didn't bounce at all
3. The genuine encouragements from friends, fellow runners, supporters and volunteers (they're heroes too!)
4. Power walking saved me some time
5. Toilet paper and bin bag are both good ideas carried out
6. Extraordinary support received by the crowds. Some of the words (especially from those not affiliated to any support teams) said were really inspiring
7. The post-race massage helped a great extent
8. I wasn't sedentary after the race and was walking quite a lot. The walk in the Bugis Mall on Sunday night eased the tightness and certainly have sped up recovery
9. Endurox once again proved its worth despite the horrendous taste
10. 2 days after Marathon Sunday, I've regained the urge to train and race. Of course I'll have to curb the urge until full recovery is in placed