

The Adventures OF Carboman

Penang Bridge Marathon 2007 Race Report

This marathon was classic case where the training went much better than the race. Having started my comeback in February, and moving into more serious stuff in April, I'd at least expected meeting 2 of my 3 goals. The base goal was to finish, the second was to PR under 4:26 and the bonus was to dip below 4 hours. The more my training progressed, the stronger the indications were, pointing to a good performance. I'd never run a marathon before in my home state and I'd wanted to make this a memorable outing.

As the weeks were checked off, I had achieved significant training milestones in terms of pace, strength and mileage. There were plenty of usual and unusual challenges to my program over the months in the form of work, time and family. The usual elements but taken up a notch or so. The more the challenges presented themselves, the more tenacious and resourceful I was. That included investing in a 3-month gym membership for the weights and shower facilities. The membership allowed me to get my morning workouts in. Any runs in the evenings became bonus workouts.



So when I toed the line wearing the tribute bib to Terence on race morning, I'd some confidence that at the very least, a PR was a given. Even though I had a less than ideal 2-week taper. Even though I had less than 2 hours of light sleep the night before the race. Due to the early start, we had to wake up at 1:30am, a disagreeable time for the body to respond to attempts to remove solid bodily wastes. Except for



the socks (Kayano) and watch (Triax 100), I wore the same gear that I PR'd in in last year's KL Marathon – the Pegasus 2005, Sphere Dry vest, Brooks shorts.

We'd checked into the Spartan but clean [Anggerik Lodge](#) the day before and while my running mates went for a variety of street food, I opted for safer ones. That would mean noodles with clear soup, nothing spicy or oily. I even opted for a Subway turkey breast sandwich as dinner. Altogether all very unexciting fare that you normally don't associate Penang for. But when you've come this far in your preparation, what's a few more "inconveniences" right?

My plan calls for 6-minute pace up to the 11K and 5:40 pace thereon. The total marathoners were about 700 while the bulk of the reported 18,000 participants were going for the 22K and 10K. The expected

wet weather didn't materialize and while most will see that as good, I'd very much preferred wet conditions. As it were, race morning was quite warm and humid. The start was brisk and I felt good. I had [Choi](#) for company as my planned pacer Geraldine had took off like a jackrabbit right from the start.



Wanting to run a controlled start, I

stuck to my pace. I ran through a mental checklist and my legs felt good and light, breathing very comfortable and form relaxed. Our position was somewhere midpack for the first 15K. The highlight was running past the big crowd as we took the first 6K loop around the start. It was great to have people cheer you on and admittedly I found myself upping the pace just for that stretch. I remembered telling Choi that we were 2 minutes ahead of schedule as we headed onto the bridge.

The first challenge came in the form of the climb up the mid-span of the bridge heading to the mainland, which I scaled with no problems by adjusting the stride length while maintaining cadence. The air had noticeably turned very dry from the sea air. The light breeze was not enough to really cool the body. While my mouth was getting rather dry, it wasn't a problem as there were plenty of fluids (chilled water) at the drink stations. Wet sponges were aplenty as well but there were no signs of sports drinks.



On the way down the other side of the climb, I told Choi that our pace was still a bit too fast and we slowed down a notch. In hindsight we could've slowed down a bit too much as when I checked my pace again, I found myself already 3 minutes off target split. I'd been running alone for sometime since exiting the bridge to make the u-turn back to the island. The runners had been assaulted with unbearable industrial stench which made breathing difficult. Apparently the smell came from the Palmco plant at the Prai side. We would only escape this olfactory discomfort 2K back onto the bridge.

Just after making the turn back to the bridge, I passed [Ben](#) who called out that I was still on target pace and to go for it. Even though I thought his statement couldn't have been right, I was uplifted, which was always a good feeling to have. At this point, the marathoners could see the half marathoners coming from the opposite side of the bridge and quite a few familiar faces like [Sim](#), [Lim](#), [Julian](#) and Uncle Sonny shouted words of encouragement to me. I felt strong and maintained this strong controlled pace all the way until the exit point of the bridge on the island side. Despite the good progress and pace, I found myself behind by 8 minutes. This can't be true. This then led me to believe that some markers were not positioned at the correct intervals. The 3-minute deficit could've been non-existent as well. I also can't be sure of my recorded splits as the distance markers were all for odd distances such as 17.5, 22.5 and so on. Since I just pressed my watch button as I passed them, I'm now unable to match them back to the actual distance and pace chart.

This is where all the good stuff ends and here comes the nightmare part. After tackling the down slope towards 27K, I felt my lower back tightening up. This problem became very acute so much so that I had to slow down and deteriorated to a shuffle/walk struggle to a finish line that didn't seem to get any closer. It got so bad that any position I adopted couldn't elevate the pain. I was very concerned about anything to do with the back and that the pain would not be a sign of a long term injury. My fear stems from my brother's present post-surgery state following his slipped disc injury. There were plenty of cursing and self-deprecating thoughts that went on in my mind when the direction of my race turned into a downward spiral.



To cut the painful story short, I limped home in 4:47.16, way off whatever expectations anyone including myself had had. After the initial disappointment, I've psychologically recovered from the disaster. Obviously there are the usual soreness but that should go away in 2 days' time. I'm taking the philosophical stance that the marathon is a weird creature. All the good preparation and time trials in the world will not guarantee a good race. While all the talk about the anticipated good performance were going around, deep down I knew how difficult it is to achieve that, especially a sub-4 timing. Every element -



weather conditions, rest, food, training, favorable race route and race execution - has to be in place. Having said that, I didn't approach the race with a defeatist attitude. I felt that I was ready for a battle and that I was capable enough to mount a strong challenge at the intended pace. Even if not for the entire distance, I thought I'd have reserves to at least carry me to 35K. As it were, things didn't quite end up as planned.

I refuse to blame the organizers for my results as I believe that a stronger runner would've coped better in any adverse conditions. Granted, the organizers could've done better by extending the availability of undiluted sports drinks over the entire distance as opposed to serving a very diluted version from 27K onwards. They could also have planned to have the entire coastal road fully lit – some stretches were in near complete darkness. Finally the officials should have prevented a human traffic jam at the exit ramp up to the USM entrance by separating the returning runners from different categories to different routes or by placing the finishing chutes at the main Jalan Gelugor instead of the poorly planned university field.

Only 1% of the world's population have completed the marathon. Which make debutants like Geraldine (4:17) and [Haza](#) (slightly over 6 hours) amazing people who are truly elites in a world full of marathon-dreamers. Yet, there are even more amazing stories out there which defy human endurance and limits. Hit this link to [read one of it](#) and be inspired.

I'm taking a 2-week break before plotting my next move on this intriguing distance. Next year's KL Marathon will be my 8th and I have plenty of time to re-look at my previous training to identify any weak spots.

Thinking points:

- ❖ Could I have peaked too soon?
- ❖ Did I set a reasonable target? I've done the pace for 32K before so what happened?
- ❖ 3am starts may not be so ideal after all
- ❖ I'll need to look at some whole-body strengthening exercises.
- ❖ The route is actually not easy. There are stretches of "hidden" climbs and some are so gradual that it's easy to underestimate the difficulty of the course. Aggressive attempts at PRs should be made on easier courses

Good points

- ❖ Pace splits written on masking tape. A cheap DIY alternative to [G-Band](#)
- ❖ [Buckeyeoutdoors.com](#) training log. It provided just the motivation one needs to string together a good training routine

Bad points

- ❖ The return of the lower back problems encountered during my debut marathon in Singapore. I'm really not sure what caused it. Could the deep tissue massage I had the Friday before the race caused a flare-up?
- ❖ Muscle tightness not encountered before during training runs. It came at about the time my back gave up.