

My First Marathon

By Karthik Vijayakumar

With less than 1% of the world's population indulging in running marathons, it's not too often that one gets to write about marathon experiences. I'm glad to have entered the elite *One-Percent Club* of long distance runners with the completion of my maiden marathon in Singapore last week.

More than just sharing my experiences during the course of the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon, I have decided to go a little further. In this article I have made an attempt to write about my experiences in the past 4-5 months, to see how it impacted my race day performance, and my life.

The Beginning...

The year 2008 started with a lot of serious running. I did the Chennai half-marathon in February 10th followed by the Auroville half-marathon in February 17th. I was covering about 40-50kilometers per week in a maintenance phase till about April. With the onset of summer, I had decided to take it easy.

I was in New York in June, and the very next day I joined by friend Ravichander for a short 5K run organized by the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) along the Hudson River Parks. This was my first 'organized' international run, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. It was when I thought – "If a mere 5K run was organized so well, how much better can a full marathon be?" The very next week I joined my friend and his Asha NYNJ chapter runners at the Central Park, only to end up with a strong determination to do one full marathon by the end of 2008. It was in July that I heard about the registrations for Singapore Marathon being opened, and I was tempted!

Last year was when I got into running seriously, and for some reason, I missed the Singapore marathon deadline. I didn't want to make the same mistake again, and immediately registered myself for the full-marathon by paying \$80 and completing the registration form. I went to Runners World and got myself a nice 16week training plan. After a week's training, I was feeling good...really good. Thought I must look forward to completing the Singapore one in less than 4 hours and 30 minutes.

The Brick Walls...

This is when the dark clouds started setting in. A spate of frequent travel came my way, and there was this time in August when I was in Pune. It was raining very heavily outside

Karthik is a part of the Asha Team. He runs to help underprivileged children with the right education. You can help him raise money for this noble cause too.

Visit: <http://www.ashanet.org/bangalore/marathon/runners/karthikV.html>



and I didn't want to compromise on my training either. I decided to head to the gym in the hotel I stayed (Sun 'N' Sand) and run on the treadmill. I started trotting at 6kilometers per hour speed and the sheer imagination of completing a marathon made me unknowingly increase the speed all the way to about 14-15kilometers per hour. I was running like a horse for more than 25minutes, and suddenly I landed a little bit heavily on my left leg. To be frank, that did not feel good! I started to reduce the speed of the treadmill until it eventually stopped.

The day went past and so did the travel. I was back in Chennai, and decided to do an evening run on one Thursday. After about 3kilometers I felt a little strain near my left knee, and I decided to walk a little bit. Not being able to withstand a snails pace, I resumed my running and there was this point at about 4kilometers when I was forced to a screeching halt! I felt excruciating pain outside my left knee.

This is when it all started. My experiences from this point till the race day on December 7th are something I've shared in my earlier blog posts mentioned below –
5 Days and 16 Hours to go...

<http://blog.karthikvijayakumar.com/2008/12/5-days-and-16-hours-to-go.html>

Getting Back to Fitness...

<http://blog.karthikvijayakumar.com/2008/11/getting-back-to-fitness.html>

Looking at the Brighter Side – Patience and Perseverance is the Key

<http://blog.karthikvijayakumar.com/2008/10/looking-at-brighter-side-patience-and.html>

It feels good to be back in action!

<http://blog.karthikvijayakumar.com/2008/10/it-feels-good-to-be-back-in-action.html>

Injury – Another Brick Wall

<http://blog.karthikvijayakumar.com/2008/08/injury-another-brick-wall.html>

The Race-day eve...

Most of you would definitely agree with me on how important the day before the D-day is. Be it exams or interviews, the day before the D-day greatly impacts your final performance. It's the same case with long distance running – Especially when you got to cover 42.195 kilometers by foot the next day!

Running (and completing) a marathon tests both the body and the mind. The course of 42.195 kilometers is a test of grit and determination. A marathon tests one's character, attitude, strength, weakness and courage.

It was December 6th in Singapore. I had spent most of the day shopping (which involved a lot of walking). It was about 9:30pm when I got back home. That was when I realized that since I was sharing the room with my parents and sister, it was good to have all my race-day essentials kept aside so that I can get myself prepared in the restroom the next



morning. I had got almost everything ready, and the clock was showing 11pm. I decided to hit the sack as I had to get up the next morning at 3:15am to get ready for my run.

For the first time in more than a decade, I felt butterflies in my stomach. I was both excited and anxious! While on one side I could feel the energy across the finish line against my chest and my name being called out with applause, I feared my knee pain hitting me during the race. In about less than half an hour's time from when I hit the sack, I suddenly found myself scratching my legs and arms. I thought it was just yet another manifestation of my anxiousness, and forced myself to sleep. But it never happened, and it was already 1am in the morning. I could not take it anymore and decided to walk out into the hall and sleep in the couch.

The Marathon Day...

It was next morning (about less than two hours from when I hit the sack) when I went to take a quick wash, and I realized that my whole body was swollen with redness. I thought that it was some weird *Singaporean Mosquitoes* that did the damn job. I was getting ready that my sister (who slept next to me) woke up with an alarming voice – “Look, my palm is bloodied and I see these 6-7 dead insects here”. This was when I realized that I had just killed one such insect (thinking it was some sort of a cockroach) that was crawling on my sport jerkin a few minutes back. Immediately I realized – “They are those goddamn bedbugs!!!”

Scratching myself like mad, I headed to the cab and asked him to drive down to the address where my friend Hari was staying with his friend. After about 10minutes lost, Hari's friend called me, only to realize that I had the wrong address! It took us another 5 minutes to get to the right address and pick up Hari. Together we drove down to a place close to the race start point. It was about 5:05am when we stepped out of the car. We headed to the baggage counter to deposit Hari's kit and then trotted to the start point. My parents, sister and my uncle's family had promised to be at the starting point by then, but I didn't see them! I had to hand over the cell phone to them...that was the plan. It was 5:30am already!! I finally spotted them in the crowd after a series of phone call exchanges, and gave them the cell phone and hurried myself through the thronging crowd to the starting point.

The Starting Point...

By then time I was at the start point it was 5:40am, and already 10minutes into the marathon! I felt good physically, but was a bit not OK mentally. I had a mix of feelings in me – Happiness, Anxiety, Anger, and Irritation. I was also worried that I couldn't hook up Ram's kid daughter Meera to my sister and parents at the starting point due to this confusion. I started to pace at a decent 9kmph and decided to keep myself well hydrated



all through the run. The weather was humid as it had rained badly the previous day. The very fact that I started the race 10 minutes late put me off a bit.

It was about 6:25am, and I was at the 5K point. I sipped half a glass of water and continued with my run. The entire running experience was a bit new to me as it was so crowded with almost one foot (or even less) of shoulder space. I had to run zigzag till about the 10K point when the crowd started to get scattered.

I had missed all my [Chennai Runners](#) friends right from the starting point, and I felt a bit lonely. Having someone by your side is always a lot of fun and takes off your attention from what you are doing. Especially during longer runs, a good running buddy helps one to increase pace and stretch the limits.

The Kenyan Spirit...

It was slightly past 13K mark when I saw one of the Kenyan runners (was the winner) running in the opposite direction (in the return loop) about 500meters from where we were running. The feeling was like watching Michael Schumacher drive the F1 lanes when we are driving in the roads of Chennai or Bangalore. The runner's posture, pace, strides, charisma was so astonishing that I started to pace faster than before without my knowledge!

A Little Encouragement and Company...

I was thoroughly enjoying the run. The water points, the cheering crowd, the school bands playing – every bit of it was so wonderfully organized. There was this point around the 15K point when I started to feel uneasiness in my right knee. I fortunately found a lady offering the pain rub ointment and decided to pause for a bit to get that stuff on both my knees.

This is when I saw this young Singaporean gentleman who had stopped for the want of the pain rub ointment. He was telling out loudly “Why did I have to subject myself to this torture? I’m going to just walk the next 5K and stop. My knees can’t take it.” I heard him and thought “He should complete the marathon! I should probably do something...can I? Let’s see...” I started off a casual conversation with him and we went on to talk about my knee injury. I just told him “If I can run with an ITB on one knee and a knee pain in another, you should definitely run as you are just giving up mentally” After about 5-8minutes, we started to resume running and my this gentleman was now doing good, pacing at 8kmph.

Now my mind got another doubt “Have I run the right direction? Why is that I did not cross any Champion chip scanner? Why is that there were no cameras to take my pictures?” This was around the 20K point, when I saw a point where they had the



scanners on both sides of the running path. After a few meters, there was this camera that was probably one of the cameras taking pictures of runners.

Happy to have got past the 21K point, I decided to slow down a little bit and keep going (but not walk). Surprisingly, I never felt an ounce of tiredness! Just the soreness in my right knee was a bit troubling me. I was now running through the ECP (East Coast Park), and it felt like I was in heaven. I saw people walking, jogging, tenting up and lazing around. I saw some shops that rented cycles and rollerblades for those who wanted to enjoy going round on wheels. This was the place I wanted to be!

Family Support...

Now my mind was looking forward for something – My parents, sister and my uncle's family. I was closing towards the 30K point. I saw the drink station on my left and badly wanted some water. That was when I heard someone call out my name – Ah! That was my dad and my uncle with their camera flashing! Couldn't have asked for a better fuel! I almost forgot to drink water. I told them that I cannot run anymore as my right knee was aching and I didn't want to lose it completely! I was then told that the rest of them were waiting at a point some 300meters down the course. Not being able to wait seeing them, I started to run faster (as opposed to my earlier decision of walking the rest of the 12.195kms).

I saw my sister, mom, aunt and her kids and felt good to hear them cheer me. Wait, I saw someone else too. Was it Meera? Yes, it was indeed her! The feeling of guilt now went off. I was now sure that Meera was in safe hands. What better could happen? I had a burden taken off my mind and a lot of fuel added by seeing all of them. It was from this point that I started to steadily pace up.

The Ferrari Confidence...

I really don't remember how I ran the next 5-6kms. It just went by so smoothly that it felt like I was *teleported*. It was about a 3kilometers before the finish point that I saw this huge showroom of Ferrari cars. Ah, that was just in time. Ferrari is my favorite car brand! Thanks to my super fast imagination, I started to feel a hundred Ferrari's rev up and rush out of me. This truly helped me to increase my pace once again.

There was no looking back from this point on. I kept running at a steady 8-9kmph and it was not long before I could sense and smell the finish line somewhere close by. Thanks to my Garmin Forerunner 305, the sensing became easier. It was just about 500meters to the finish line! The mixed feelings that spun through me felt really different. It was like smelling your favorite food being served hot somewhere close by after days of starvation. It was like seeing your long lost love after a long spell of loneliness. It truly felt great!



The Last Mile...

The final 500meters was the most memorable part of the run. It was like getting closer to the brighter side of a dark tunnel. It was like a big ball of highly positive energy pulling us towards it. It was like a thousand magnets pulling a hairpin. I could feel tremendous energy fill my body from all sides. I could feel the strength of a thousand horses in me. I started to pound the asphalt at an average of 13-14kmph. Before I actually embarked on such a speed, I wanted to get rid of the small mineral water bottle in my hand. I kept it in one cornerstone and started off on my final lap.

I could see the finish line at a distance not greater than 200meters. The crowd was cheering and I could see the timer on the finish line from afar. As I got closer I felt like an eagle effortlessly gliding down towards its prey. As I neared the finish line I could hear my name being called out and my completion time being announced. As I crossed the finish line, I felt like a dart flawlessly hitting the center of a dartboard.

Finish Line and after...

My eyes were searching. I was turning around to find no one near the finish line. I was a bit unhappy here as I would've liked to see people I know soon after I crossed the finish line. I slowly walked down and sat on one of the benches near the medal and tee collection area. I untied my left shoe lace to remove my chip and then walked towards the tent to collect my Finisher Medal. Then I walked down to the tee counter to collect my Finisher Tee. Walking out of the tent I still saw no familiar face there. Where are my parents and sister? Where are my uncle, aunt and the kids? Where are my Chennai Runners friends? I saw no one!

Overwhelming pleasure...

In just about 5minutes I saw my sister out of no where and then slowly the rest of my family. It was only then that I realized that my uncle was waiting at the turning (soon after I kept my bottle on the cornerstone and started to pace up) with his Nikon D40 to take some final lap snaps. My dad and sister were apparently one of the spectators who gleefully cheered me when I crossed the finish line. I felt so bad and sad for having thought what I thought earlier – They were all more eager to be with me than I was. I was overwhelmed! I saw Shahid just then, only to realize that he also had a bad day with a 6:40 finish.

I changed my running tee and wore my running jerkin from the kit back my sister was carrying. Slipped out of my running shoe into a pair of sandals from my kit bag and walked towards the foot massage tent. After just about 4-5minutes of wait, I was called in for leg massage. For over 10 minutes my feet and legs enjoyed the most relieving massage they ever had.



The Spirit of a Marathoner...

Though I completed the marathon in 6:47, this has been by far the best run I've ever had as I finished really strong (I could've run another 10Kms if someone gave me company), had my family by my side and of course completed a full-marathon! I finally did bring my dreams of doing my first marathon in 2008 to fruition. I have proved to myself and the world that NOTHING CAN STOP ME from doing something! I've always believed that marathoners have unmatched grit and determination with a NEVER SAY DIE attitude. I'm happy to be a marathoner! God Bless!

Attitude of Gratitude...

I could not have got here without any support. There is someone who started it in me, there is someone who has constantly driven me and motivated me, there is someone who has constantly endured all my demands and funniness and above all there are many who have wished well for me. I would like to specially thank a few people here –

Ram Viswanathan – He is a man who can make rocks dance. He can possibly motivate even snails to do ultra-marathons. To me, he has been more than a mentor. He was the one who brought me into the world of long distance running, and I could never have dared to dream of a marathon without him. Thanks Ram!

Harishankar – This is a man who comes with a great level of patience and enthusiasm. He can run a marathon and give a TV interview in parallel. There were days when he used to give me tips on running during our runs. He was the one who made me run my first long distance run of 28kilometers at a pace of 9kmph (this was close to two years ago). Thanks Hari!

My Parents and Sister – I still cannot understand how they are able to put up with my craziness! They have never questioned my craziness (especially when I get out of home in the early morning hours at 2-3am for a run). Their support during the Singapore Marathon just goes beyond words. Thanks Dad, Mom and Sis.

My Uncle, Aunt and the kids – They did get up early in the morning and come to the starting point. I still cannot understand – I would've slept! More so, they stayed on till I finished the marathon! Amazing support...couldn't have asked for more! Thanks uncle, aunty, Shashank and Sudarshan (my kid cousins)...you made my day!

