

The Virgin Marathon 2011 by a marathon virgin

To most people the idea of running 26 miles sounds mad, impossible, or both. It's definitely not something I thought I would ever be able to do. As a shy, slightly asthmatic child I'd invent excuses to get out of PE at school. I only started running in my mid-40s, after being inspired by seeing thousands of people of all ages, shapes, sizes and levels of fitness having a go at the Great North Run. I decided that I too would have a go. Back then even the thought of a 10k seemed impossible, five years later I've run a marathon.

Training

Some people say that the training is harder than the race itself. It involves a huge time commitment and can take over your life, not to mention the effect that has on family and friends. I started training at the beginning of December, making a total of 20 weeks, although serious contenders would prepare for longer than that. Also, if I'm honest, my training was a bit haphazard initially, partly because of the snow and ice and Christmas, and partly because I couldn't decide which of two training plans I should follow. I didn't know if they were aimed at someone like me, doing their first marathon, or somebody starting from no running at all. Fellow Toddies gave me marathon training advice, but I still wasn't sure what was the best approach for me because most of the Toddies I spoke to were all more experienced runners than me, some with several marathons under their belts. Time was passing and I was still faffing about.

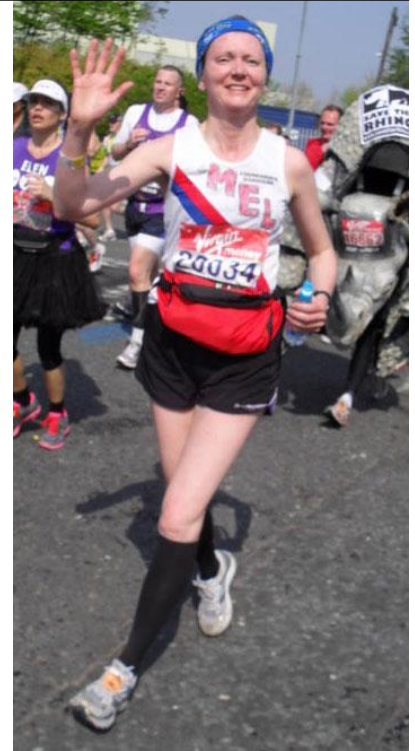
It was Joolz who guided me through the training fog and I started to follow a plan from a book she lent me, aiming to run on five days each week, a mixture of speed work, lactate threshold runs, recovery runs, long runs, and something called VO2 max, which I never really got the hang of. I would have liked to add in some cycling for cross-training but a nasty fall in early January on my new bike meant I lost confidence and stayed off the bike.

Joolz was training for the Edinburgh marathon, a month after London, so we started running a few extra miles together on a Wednesday evening on our way to the park runs, comparing notes on how our training was going.

I was becoming a bit obsessed with the training plan. After the Pennine Bridleway Relay at the end of January, which I ran with Joolz, I looked at the amount of running I'd been doing compared to The Plan, decided it wasn't enough, panicked, and made the mistake of increasing my weekly mileage too suddenly, by more than you are supposed to. This didn't cause any problems at first, but I blame that now for the Achilles pain that developed in the weeks leading up to the race, and which now, in May, seems to be getting worse...

In February I ran the Liversedge half-marathon, really enjoyed it, finishing ten minutes faster than the year before. I even ran an extra two miles at the end (because that was how

many miles The Plan said I had to do that day!). I started running longer long runs on Sundays. Not having a Garmin or similar, I adopted the low-tech approach of mile markers written on the back of an envelope. Martin and I measured a 20-mile out-and-back route driving on both Rochdale Road and Burnley Road (so as to have a choice of route), measuring each mile against a memorable feature like a bus stop, pub, speed limit sign. My favourite mile marker was the angel in the churchyard at Cornholme, mile 4.



Burnley Road became my preferred long run route, because of the views that open up after you leave Portsmouth. There was one low point though. Running past The House That Jack Built the day of a Man U/Liverpool match on Sky, I had to run the gauntlet of a heaving mass of testosterone outside the pub at half-time. One man shouted "I can effing run faster than you" while his mates aimed flying kicks at the bus shelter. What made things even worse was that my water bottle had started leaking in my bum-bag, making it look like I was wetting myself as I ran past.

Taper madness

The three-week taper period before the race is when you gradually decrease the number of miles run each week. I was looking forward to easing off, expecting it would all be plain sailing. I hadn't anticipated "taper madness", when your mind, and body, start playing tricks on you. Doubts: maybe all of my training has been completely wrong? Pains appeared out of nowhere. Fear: after all those months of training, some last-minute injury might stop me doing the race. I just wanted to get to London and get it all over with.

The day before the race

On arrival at Kings Cross, on the recently-introduced Grand Central train service from Halifax, we made our way to Docklands for the race registration procedure. I think it's supposed to get you "in the mood" - the idea being that you meet up with other runners, swap stories, eat an

over-promoted and over-priced pasta meal. I didn't like being herded through a massive arena filled with people trying to sell you things. We took the shortest route and left. Although I have to confess I weakened and bought some commemorative Adidas shorts, a t-shirt, and a beetroot juice energy shot drink. Already the signs of desperation appearing? - being prepared to risk drinking some untried drink on race day in the hope it might give me an edge.

We then went our separate ways to meet up with friends. I spent a very enjoyable evening relaxing with my friends who fed me lots of pasta and cake and gave me a comfy bed. I was a little late going to bed but the nerves were kicking in about what lay ahead. I laid all my kit out, checked it, checked it again, packed, unpacked, repacked my bag, then finally sleep.

Sunday, 17th April, 2011

The weather forecast said it would be hot. It was deceptively cool and overcast first thing. I made my way from Beckenham to Blackheath by train, gradually noticing more runners on the way to the station, on the platform, on the train. Once off the train, a huge procession of runners through Blackheath to the start. My first impression on reaching the common was of a music festival. Portaloos. Catering. Water bottles. Loud music and voice commentary, police and TV helicopters overhead.

I tried to stay focused on the job in hand: drink water, wee, check-in bag. But in what order? Decided on: get water, drink water while waiting for wee, get rid of bag. Suddenly horrified to see myself on a large TV screen in the queue for the loo, followed by panic when the voice on the loudspeakers said "Ten minutes left to check in your bags." WHAT??? It's going to take at least ten minutes to get to the loo! Needless panic. The baggage queues were worse than the loo queues.

After checking in my bag, realising that I'd checked in my sunscreen without applying any, I tried to locate my starting pen. I wanted to jump ahead a few pens, but there were very determined marshalls on all pen entry points so I obeyed the rules. Stroke of luck though: in my official pen I got to the front and then joined a mass break for the next pen. So by the time the race started I wasn't far off being near the 9 minute mile markers, where I wanted to be.

The race start was a bit of an anticlimax. No big gun or anything. We just started moving slowly, gradually picking up to running, quicker than I thought. My plan was to stick as close as possible to a 9 minute mile pace throughout. I'd been told I should be able to finish in just under 4 hours, based on recent race times. My time for the Spen 20 in March was 3h 3m which was only slightly over the 9 minute mile pace I needed for a sub-4 hour, but Spen was hilly so I figured I could go faster at London.

I first saw Martin at mile 9 and he ran alongside till after mile 10 which gave me a real boost. Some people thought he was running the race in jeans and wearing a rucksack! He was

there again at miles 15 and 18, when things were going badly for me, and finally by Big Ben when I was out of the doldrums.

I had been expecting to make it to 20 miles and then suffer. I was not expecting to start to suffer soon after the half-way point. I began to get pains in places I hadn't had pains at all during training and my legs felt heavy. Surely this can't be the Wall already? I hadn't gone off too fast, my pre-race fuel and hydration had been good. What's going on? I got downhearted then because at that point it literally felt like I hadn't done any training at all. All positive thinking deserted me, when I needed it most.

I had enjoyed the atmosphere in the first few miles, joining in hand-slapping the hands extended by spectators, marvelling at the uplifting effect of complete strangers smiling and shouting encouragement, and the kindness of people holding out sweets, orange segments and other food they'd thought to bring along for those who needed it. Now that things were going wrong I wasn't enjoying the race at all any more. The inescapable heat, the deafening noise (I wanted to be back on a training run on some quiet Calder Valley road or track), the smell of barbecued food (making me feel nauseous), and, as the race progressed, dodging all the discarded water bottles and Lucozade sports bottles in the road was becoming increasingly hard, I went over on my ankle twice by treading on one. I was even doubting I was going to finish I felt so awful.

Bizarrely I recovered towards the end of the race, my legs started working again, and I enjoyed running the last three miles. I finished in 4h 16m 52s. Not the sub-4 hour I'd been hoping for, but I was chuffed to find I'd finished ahead of Olympic athlete, Iwan Thomas!

