London Marathon 2023 – My Training and Race Experience.

It have wanted to run the London Marathon for about 20 years. I remember being in London when Paula Radcliffe broke the world record in 2003 and being really inspired. I really wanted London to be my first marathon but I had entered the ballot many times over the years and always been unsuccessful and last year was no different. Fortunately I had another chance as Airecentre Pacers get a club place each year which members can apply for. At our AGM in November, our guest speaker, Olympic triathlete Georgia Taylor-Brown, had the job of picking a name out of the hat. I could not believe it when she said my name.

I started training in early December and having looked at various training plans in books and online I put together my own plan to fit around my life and club runs. It was based on gradually increasing my long runs over 4 months as well as Pilates and gym work to try and prevent injury. I stuck loosely to the 80/20 principle – that 80% of your runs should be at a really easy pace and only 20% should be hard. In the first few months I was absolutely exhausted after the long runs and would struggle to do anything for the rest of the day. It felt very similar to the first trimester of pregnancy. Fortunately as the training progressed the post-run fatigue improved which was a good sign that I was getting fitter.

Luckily lots of people in the running club were also training for the Rob Burrows Marathon and so I had a group of club mates to train with, invaluable on those long runs. Myself, Francesca, Sophie & Fran did a long run pretty much every Saturday morning for 17 weeks and built up to 20 miles and have encouraged each other along the way.

My training plan also consisted of Monday and Wednesday ACP club runs. A steady ‘recovery’ run on a Monday with the 6.30pm group and a weekly speed session on Wednesdays with the 7pm group (my 20% hard). I then did 1 or 2 easy 5k recovery runs on other days and built up my weekly mileage from my usual 20-26 miles a week to a peak training week of 40 miles. Despite the strength work I was still troubled by a niggle in my right hip that would build up to a dull ache at the end of long runs but did not stop me completing any of my training runs.

I did my final 20 mile run 3 weeks before and then tapered after that gradually reducing my weekly mileage. I felt exhausted for most of this time when I felt like I should have lots of energy. Fortunately about 2 days before the marathon I started to feel really good and I could not wait for the start line.

The experience of just getting across London to the start on the morning of race day was brilliant. The tube filled up with other runners and I got into a group with about 5 other women, who were all also doing their first marathon. We shared lots of stories of how we had come to be running that day, and there was a real sense of being part of something. It was a drizzly morning as we gathered in Greenwich Park and waited for our start wave.

I really didn’t know how I should pace myself for the marathon having never raced the distance before so in the end I ran very much on feel, at a pace that felt comfortable and sustainable, just checking my watch from time to time to check I wasn’t going too fast. As my training had gone well I was faster than the predicted time I had put down, which meant my ‘start wave’ was too slow and I did a lot of overtaking and weaving around people and probably ended up running further. (My Garmin says I ran 26.6 miles!)

The first few miles went quickly, we ran through residential streets and everyone was outside their houses cheering us on and blasting out music. It was great to see Fran in the early miles which really gave me a boost. The next high point was Cutty Sark – the crowds were huge, about 10 people deep and the noise of the cheering so loud. The miles kept ticking along and I felt really good. My hip had predictably started to ache but it was not too bad. I knew Tower Bridge was around the halfway point so was looking out for it. At 12.5 miles there was a sharp 90 degree turn and there it was. I felt myself smiling from ear to ear – I was running across Tower Bridge in the London Marathon and nearly halfway! The crowds over Tower Bridge were epic and as we came off the bridge speakers were blasting out Bon Jovi, Livin’ on a Prayer – “Whoa, we’re halfway there!”

At this point of the course there is about 2-3 miles were the course goes in both directions. As we joined this part the 3.15 pacer came past in the other direction. I knew several of my club mates would not be far behind so got into position to look out for them. I managed to see Brenda and give her a cheer as she sped last me!

At 15 miles I had drunk everything in my hydration pack and handed this over to my husband as planned. I felt really good at this point. Over the next 5-6 miles we weaved around Canary Wharf. I felt comfortable and was maintaining the pace, but the dull ache was building up more in my hip. By about 21 miles it was really quite painful and I knew I should stop and try and stretch it. It was hard to stop though as every inch of the course had spectators cheering us on and shouting out my name. I knew my husband and kids would be at around 21-22 miles so once I saw them I stopped for a stretch and it really was quite painful at this point with pain all down the outside of my leg into my knee which I knew was my ITB. I carried on running but it felt like quite a painful hobble at this point. I tried stretching again which did not help. I tried walking but that was just as painful so I thought I may as well just carry on jogging.

I felt so frustrated at this point as I still had lots of energy, I did not feel tired and was hardly out of breath, but could not run properly. The charity I was raising money for had a cheer point at mile 22-23 which I had planned to look out for, but I was so distracted by the pain that I got to mile 24 and realised I had missed them, but also realised that meant I only had a couple of miles left. I kept going and even though I had slowed down, I was still overtaking a lot of people who were walking.

At this point the London Eye was in sight and I had heard that once you are level with it you have exactly a mile left. We then turned right in front of Big Ben and soon after my watch was telling me I had run 26.2 miles but I still had 600m to go. A few minutes later and Buckingham Palace came into view, and then the finish line was in sight.

I had smashed my original target of sub 4.30, finishing in 4 hours 18 minutes. I felt really emotional getting my medal although I was also frustrated about picking up an injury as this is something I have worked hard over the years to try and avoid.

I am due to run the Rob Burrows Marathon in another few weeks but I will have to see how it goes as, a week later, my knee is still quite sore. However I think it is fair to say I have caught the marathon bug. I feel I have unfinished business now as if I can sort my hip issues out I know I am capable of a faster marathon. I have also thoroughly enjoyed the process; I have loved the long chatty runs with friends and the feeling of getting stronger and fitter. It does however feel like the marathon has occupied a huge part of my life for the last 5 months so it is now time for a rest - for a little while at least.

**Typical Training Week:**

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| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 6.30pm club run.Steady 6m | Pilates+/- 3m easy run | 7pm club run. Speed work 7-8m | Gym – Strength | Rest Day | Long Run10-20m | Yoga+/- 3m easy run |

**My Marathon Tips:**

**Find Your Tribe** – long runs are easier with friends so find people training for the same distance who are the same pace as you and make sure your training plans are compatible. Making regular club runs part of my training also helped especially over the dark winter months.

**Practice Nutrition** – you have to fuel on long runs so practice this – energy powders, gels, sweets etc. Find something that works for you and your stomach and then stick to it on race day.

**Don’t Ignore The Niggles** – I hoped that my aches and pains would just stay as niggles but now I wish I had taken them a bit more seriously and seen a sports physio beforehand.