

The Bath Half,

Sunday 12 March 2017

On Saturday, Sophie and I drive to Clevedon to stay with our friends Jonathan and Alison.

Jonathan is planning to run the Bath Half with me in the morning. He is one of those maniacs who swims in the sea every day of the year – including the depths of winter – and so we wait for him to do his daily dip by the pier at dusk before heading to the pub. However, he is currently suffering from a problematic metatarsal and so is planning to take things easy in Bath, aiming for a time of about 1:48:00. I tell him what I've been telling everyone else – that I'm hoping to run under 100 mins – but I add that I *think* I could do 1:38:00. That's roughly 7:30 per mile pace.

The secret to long-distance success, so I am told by Rob Bourne, is to run 'negative splits': to run the second half of the race faster than the first half. My plan is to set off doing 7:30 per mile and then see where we are after seven miles. If I can get there within 52:30, I should have every chance of beating 1:38.

I wake at 4:12am and cannot get back to sleep. I lie there, thinking in the dark, until my mind has run several half marathons, each one quicker than the last. Eventually I can remain still no more and get up. Jonathan joins me and has breakfast while I drink coffee, and we talk about the run. I've never run the Bath Half before but he has done it in 95 minutes in the past, and thus is full of advice. We drive to the station and see a chap in running kit waiting to buy his ticket to Bath, and chat to him. Just a pair of training shoes on a day like today is sufficient to spark a conversation. On the train, which is so crowded it has standing room only, we talk to a family who are going as supporters. The wife sees my book cover on my running shirt and takes a photograph for her Facebook page. Their nephew is running to raise money for a cancer

charity because his mother has been diagnosed with the disease. There is a moment's pause in the conversation. In my own mind I contrast the life-and-deaths struggles of people I have known who have had cancer and my personal ambition to run 13.1 miles in less than 100 minutes. I can't help feeling just a little that their nephew is running magnanimously while I am doing so selfishly, even if the generosity of one act does not undermine the value of another.

When the crowd swarms off the train, we are swallowed up in an even bigger mass of people, many of whom are in running gear, pinning their numbers on their shirts or tying their timing chips to their shoes. With half an hour to go, we have a coffee and head to the start by way of the runners' village. There is a real buzz of excitement in the air, movement everywhere. Jonathan and I take our place in pen E, where runners of comparable ability are grouped together. He is an art historian and so we naturally admire the architecture of our surroundings. After all, we are in Great Pulteney Street, one of the grandest streets in the whole of Bath. I look at the columns and architrave designed by Thomas Baldwin in the late eighteenth century and see reflections of the work of the seventeenth-century architect William Talman, which I wrote about in *The Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain*. Now I must start work on the Regency period for *The Time Traveller's Guide to Regency Britain*. I might as well regard the book as beginning now, when the gun goes for this race. Running through the epitome of Regency Britain is as good a way to start a new work as any.

I do not look at the architecture after the start. I simply follow a mass of bobbing colourful shirts and shorts. There are so many people! It takes me over two minutes of shuffling forward to get to the start line. Even after that, when we are jogging, we are moving far too slowly. There are crowds everywhere and good-natured jostling as runners sort themselves out. I wonder why I have to overtake so many of them – why have they been placed in this starting pen if they are so slow? I find myself nipping around the outside and weaving in and out of the stream of jogging bodies flowing down to the river and the bridge. Despite this, my time for the

first two miles is 14:38, and I feel heartened. I'm slightly ahead of schedule and it is not taking too much effort. The runners start thinning out as we run down towards Newbridge, and I speed up accordingly. My third mile is 7:06, my fourth 7:08. There's a short stretch of about a third of a mile after the bridge to the bend, after which we all turn back to the town centre. I see thousands of colourful shirts ahead of me and wonder at how dated that Alan Sillitoe book title, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, seems these days. Frankly, running long distances is one way to make sure you will never be lonely again.

The next two miles see me slip back a bit: 7:17 and 7:21. Fine. I don't need to be running at 7:06 per mile, even on a downhill section. I pass the 10k mark in 45:05 on my watch, with which I am happy: my pace is only marginally slower than the first 5k (22:28). After seven miles, or 51 minutes exactly, I am over a minute and a half ahead of schedule. And then, very suddenly, as I run towards Queen's Square for the second time, it all feels very hard. I cannot continue to run at this pace. I speed up on the downhill slope but thereafter I struggle more and more. My eighth mile takes eight minutes. And I have another five to go. How on earth am I going to continue? We are not even out of town yet: it is going to be difficult even to reach Newbridge. Oh, Heavens above! I did not expect this. I feel so tired all I want to do is stop. And I have only done eight miles. What is happening to me? I hear a siren. Marshals shout for us all to keep right as an ambulance goes past. Some poor runner has collapsed. He must have overreached himself. Is that going to be my fate if I carry on? Ventricular fibrillation, the failure of the electrical pulses in the heart that cause the chambers to quiver rather than pump, causing heart attack and normally death within a matter of minutes. Christ, I wish now I'd never read about it.

Nine miles done. One mile more I will be at Newbridge, where the road turns back to the town. All I need to do is to keep going. But this is hard, really hard. I run to the left-hand side of the road, not knowing whether I want to be sick or just spit. I start doing the mental maths to keep my mind off how awful I feel. I did seven miles in fifty-one minutes – that leaves

me forty-nine to do the last 6.1 miles if I am to finish in under 100 minutes. At eight minutes a mile, it is just possible. But the last mile was 8:09: those extra nine seconds are not a good sign. And the half marathon has a sting in the tail: the last 0.1 mile, an extra 45 seconds of pain on top of the extreme discomfort you are already feeling after 13 miles. People are flocking past me now. *They* all knew to pace themselves better than I did. *They* all heeded Rob Bourne's advice to run negative splits. They might have been in my way at the start, going slowly, but they knew what they were doing.

'Well done, everyone' shouts a woman on the side of the road.

Everyone, I wonder? Actually, lady, I think you'll find that some of them are doing much better than me. But I don't stop to discuss the finer points of my lack of performance.

At 9.5 miles I reach Newbridge with a grimace across my face. But we are not turning back to the town here. I have misremembered. There is another third of a mile until the turn. My mind is playing tricks with me. I want this to be over so much; I am really suffering. My watch buzzes to tell me the tenth mile is up: it has taken me 8:20. All hope of 100 minutes has well and truly gone. I can hardly envisage running another three miles at all, let alone at this speed. Even the shouts of the supporters alongside the road do not give me heart. But I refuse to give in. I tell myself that it is better to slow down and just jog than walk, or stop altogether. This part of the town is grimy and industrial; its lack of inspirational qualities compared to Great Pulteney Street mirrors my lack of inspiration now compared with my optimism at the start of the race. This is agony. I can't even tell you what is hurting. It is just that I am so tired. I think if it were a pain I'd be able to focus on it but this is just an overwhelming suffocation. I am not being stabbed but smothered. I keep checking my watch: 10.56 miles, 10.78 miles, 10.89 miles. Surely I should be at eleven miles by now? 10.97 miles. Will this mile never end?

Every second is a struggle. The desire to stop pulses through my body with every beat of my heart. Other runners sweep past me, on both sides. Tall, short, male, female, bald, bearded,

grey-haired, brunette, blond, red-headed, young and old. Shirts of all colours, with all sorts of messages. I begin to tell myself that I can still finish the race if I walk; it won't be the end of the world. In fact no one will care apart from me. But therein lies a truth: I do care. I care enough to make up for everyone else here. I will not walk. My watch tells me my pulse is hovering around 175bpm. Someone once told me the fastest your heart can go safely is 220 minus your age: my maximum safe zone would thus be 171bpm. But who told me that? Is it true? *Ventricular fibrillation*... I keep looking at my watch. Oh God! Still not twelve miles. Just hang on in there, Ian. Just make it to the end of this mile. Then there will be just one more to go. After another small eternity, the watch buzzes: 8:36 for the twelfth mile. Just ten minutes more at this pace. But ten minutes of *this*? You have got to be kidding. I would rather go for a dip in the ocean with Jonathan in January. How stupid I was to think I could keep running at sub-7:30 pace after doing just two long runs in the last five months. Parkruns have fooled me into thinking I am getting fitter when actually I was woefully underprepared for the longer distance.

I am almost delirious. I've lost the ability to do the mental maths to add up my total time. I can't even remember what the entrance to Great Pulteney Street looks like. So much for great architecture. There is a turn in the path ahead and I convince myself that the finish is just around the corner. I try to speed up but my legs barely respond. Then I realise it is not the turning to the finish but a roundabout. There are still a couple of hundred yards to go until the corner. I feel I am wobbling. When I do finally see Great Pulteney Street, the last hundred yards to the finish line looks like a joke. I was expecting it to be just there, right in front of me. Instead the organisers have clearly thought it would be really funny to move it back a hundred yards, to make me run further. That's how stupid I am now: my thoughts are stumbling about and crashing into silly extremes, as if they were falling out of a tree, striking the branches of ludicrousness on the way down.

That thirteenth mile took me 8:53. Awful. But I don't care anymore. All that I care about is that I have just another few yards.

And it's over.

I stumble to the side of the road and lean against the railings. They shudder and scrape on the pavement, and fall back. I sit down. My final time is 1:43:44. That's only slightly faster than my time for the Great West Run last year (1:43:58), which was run over the much steeper hills in and around Exeter, when I had a cold and my hip problem was at its worst. When I pick myself up and walk towards the runners' village, I accept a bottle of Lucozade gratefully. A lad offers me a finisher's medal; I gesture to him to put around my neck: I can't talk. I walk to the fountain in Great Pulteney Street where I have arranged to meet Jonathan, and wait for him, hardly cognisant of the world around me. A man sees my shirt and says 'Well done, Ian,' as he walks past. 'That was so tough,' I reply, finding my voice at last. 'Looks like it,' he says.

Ian Mortimer,

13 March 2017