

RUNNING LONDON

by Rhys Watkins

There I was on the train on the way to the start. A few more stops and we would be getting off for the short walk to the start. Lots of people were standing, crammed in like sardines. It's little wonder why Tracey doesn't like coming to the start with me. People had heads in other peoples armpits; runners, supporting kids and partners were getting hot and flushed; people farting; and that potent varnish smell of germolene. It was all a bit uncomfortable. The train stopped in the middle of nowhere, again. I tried my northern socialising skills out, but didn't get further than 'yes this is my first time' from someone before I realised everyone in the carriage was listening into our conversation, and I felt a bit intimidated. So much so I shut up, and just pulled faces at some kid opposite.

Still I was surrounded by runners, on the way to a run. How better can this be. The sun was out, and I even had a seat. Then all of a sudden I started to have a nose bleed. Not really what I wanted. I hadn't even been picking my nose to save weight. Within moments everyone seemed to be watching my every move. Look he's got a bloody nose bleed; Thank goodness I'm not in his shoes; Cor that's a tough one; I wouldn't know where to look; Poor lad, that's his running days over, you could hear them thinking. It's a nose bleed and I'm suddenly the centre of everyone's attention, again. Of course nobody offered any assistance, but then I could have been a carrier for some rare and infectious northern disease, like man flu. So, I took off my knotted hanky from my head and bunged up my nose. Funny 'cos after that everyone was avoiding eye contact with me. I had my Toddy vest covered up, but you can count on me to be an ambassador for the club, anytime, anywhere.

My one bit of advice, I now recall, is head for the toilets first. Everything else can wait, other than the starting gun, of course. The deed done, my bag handed over to some spotty scout youth, I casually wandered over to pen 2. There are 1-9 pens depending on whether you are Elvis, a rhino, or a serious runner. I was in the same pen as loads of other club runners, and a fairy. I looked around and to my delight there was no lobsters or wombles to compete with (like last time). Concentrate on that fairy I told myself.

Thankfully we just about managed not to stop within the first mile. After that I was able to pick my own pace. The pressure was off, although worryingly that fairy was still a bit too close.

My strategy was simply, run the first few miles at 3-15 pace, see how I go, and back off if need be. I was pleasantly surprised to be exerting myself relatively comfortably, so I tried to stick to the 3-15 schedule. Mile by mile flew by. Every mile marker I checked my split time. 'The watch doesn't lie' was going to be my motto. I did miss to press my watch at a few of the mile markers in the 2nd half which annoyed me 'cos it looked like I was running just over 14 minute miles, instead of 7. But I took one of my secret pills, a coffee bean in chocolate, which seemed to put my mind back on track.

Once you're at Big Ben then it's fairly quick to the finish, I remember. When you get on the embankment you expect to see Big Ben – after all you've only got a couple of miles to go. But I couldn't see it. You can see the Thames disappearing around the corner several miles ahead. Big Ben was obviously hidden by the trees directly ahead. No far now. But I've been here before, and know that there is a sting to this race. Sure enough a mile, or so later, you see the top of Big Ben slowly coming into view further round the bend of the river – not where I thought it was. It's a long, long way, certainly more than just over one mile. How am I going to get to the finish in less than 15 minutes. Yes I was a bit down at this stage. A great run up to now, but my legs were getting heavier and Big Ben looked so small in the distance. Even my watch isn't making sense. Where's mile 25 marker? I can't remember seeing it. I could see how far I needed to go, and it wasn't good.

Of course I reach Big Ben, eventually. Oh and the joy of that downhill bit just after. I'm doing the best I could, seconds are ticking by, hang in there. The guy in front has a bit of a stagger. His legs buckle beneath him, and he collapses onto the road just in front of me. Not that I had any energy, but I was just too far away to break his fall. Still I haven't time for this. I saw the crowds gasp and shout at him to get up. They can all sort him out, I thought. I run past the side of him, only to realise the crowds were helpless behind the barriers. That chap was on his own. I didn't know who was behind but there couldn't have been many that close to him. It's only a flipping time. Stop you bugger. 300m from the finish and I turn round, run back and start to help him up. Only a copper was moving over too and he waved me on. A BIG thank you to Mr Copper. Humanity restored, I went round the corner and down the Mall to record my best time ever : 3 hours, 15 minutes and 31 seconds.

For me I didn't think the heat was that much of a problem (21°C I believe) – probably as there was a lovely breeze. Although, there was one point that I was getting a bit too hot, but half a bottle of water over my head sorted that out. Mind you, I've never seen so many people veering uncontrollably across the road, people staggering, people simply out of it. It was becoming common place to see runners sitting in the gutters getting assistance. A tad worrying when you are pushing yourself at the end.

Nonetheless, I expect there to be plenty of 'competition' to get the few Toddy places available next year (assuming we get any). It really is a superb race, and really worth going for. Make it your first marathon and you will not be disappointed. Afterwards, sitting on the cordoned-off road, by the Cenotaph, drinking beer in the sun, within earshot of Downing Street, with not a care in the world – priceless.

Thank you Toddies for the place and special thank you to Graeme for Tuesday night training. Oh yes, I got beaten by a Deaf Man and that Fairy, but thankfully no wombles/lobsters.