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ChiRunning® & ChiWalking®

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THE BOSTON MARATHON – ONE RUNNER’S EXPERIENCE

Yes, it had really happened. On December 4, 2005, I had qualified to run in the marathon of marathons—The Boston Marathon. And now, the time to actually run the race had arrived. April 17, 2006, the 110th Running of the Boston Marathon and I would be there.

From December until April, I had continued with the training approach that I had used for Big Sur, Portland and the California International (Sacramento) marathons in 2005—three focused workouts a week including an interval run, a tempo run and a long run. Add to that, ongoing mental preparation, e.g., reviewing and visualizing the course before I went to sleep each night, and regular cross-training which consisted of a weekly game of ice hockey and a couple of vigorous walking sessions each week, and I figured to be as ready as I could be. Given my particular approach to running, namely ChiRunning®, I felt confident that my balanced and focused preparation would suit me better than a high weekly mileage approach. Soon I would see.

As with life in general, the preparation for a marathon is not something that can be totally predicted or controlled. And so it happened that just three weeks before the big day, during my Sunday morning hockey game, I had the misfortune of colliding with an opposing player leading to a very sore left knee, a stretched ligament and bruised soft tissue, I later learned. Luckily, I had completed the bulk of my training and I was about to begin my tapering period but by no means had I planned to stop running completely for the remaining three weeks before the race. Given the sensitivity of my knee, I decided to substitute fast walking to retain my conditioning level and, of course, I continued to do my mental preparation and personal “psyching”.

The Boston Marathon is always held on the third Monday of April, the Patriots Day holiday in Massachusetts. In order to get acclimated and to spend time with my brother and friends who were driving down from Canada to cheer me on, I flew to Boston a few days early. By the time I arrived, the town was already in high gear celebrating Boston Marathon Weekend. On Saturday and Sunday, the Expo Fair was held with thousands of

runners and friends crowding through the conference center. This year's workshops included a presentation by former race winners such as Grete Weitz. The traditional night—before, pasta loading dinner started outside in City Hall plaza amidst high winds and ended up inside where runners got to meet and eat with several thousand of their fellow competitors.

Race Day began early even though the starting time was not until midday. Since the race is a one-way course starting in the town of Hopkinton and ending in downtown Boston, the logistics of transporting 22,000 runners to the start necessitated a long morning of travel and waiting and provided another opportunity to hang out with people from all over the world. As fate would have it, my seatmate on the bus ride to the start was a teacher and avid marathoner from my hometown of Ottawa. Overall, the population of runners was very diverse and well balanced by gender with about 8,000 women entrants—a far cry from the late 60's when it was still “illegal” for women to run in the race. By the time we got to the holding areas, it was clear that the weather for the race would be perfect—mid-50's, mixed sunny and overcast, no rain, no wind. What more could we ask.

This year, a new system was implemented at the start such that elite women began at 11:30 a.m., shortly after the wheelchair racers and half an hour before the elite men and the first wave of 10,000 regular runners. The second wave of 10,000, including yours truly, was set to start at 12:30. The idea was to give the top women some space to run freely without being surrounded by the men and to use the two waves to spread out the runners and the impact on the little town of Hopkinton (too many runners needing last minute potty stops). With tracking chips on the runners' shoes, official race times would be accurate no matter what time someone started. (And, of course, because of the chips, there could be no more Rosie Ruiz fiascos like in the 1980 Boston marathon). Another new feature this year was the opportunity for interested friends of runners to go on the web and track their progress in live-time as data was produced at every 5K mark as well as at the halfway point and finish line. This feature was appreciated by some friends of mine who used it to follow my progress and to identify just where I ran into trouble during the race.

The first 5 miles of the course are somewhat downhill so it was relatively easy to maintain my desired race pace in the early phase in spite of the masses running alongside of me. There were a few Elvises, a couple of juggling runners, one of whom finished in 3:06, and a platoon of fully packed army runners, but most of the field appeared to be regular runners striving to meet their personal goals just like me. At the halfway point I was on track to meet my own personal goal of breaking 4 hours just as I had done to qualify a few months earlier. Just before halfway, the crowds of spectators which had been evident all along the course, reached new heights. Lining the street in front of Wellesley College were several hundred young women students screaming encouragement to all who ran by and reaching out to slap hands with every runner they could reach. Not too concerned about my time, I couldn't resist deviating to the right so that I could slap a few hands although I did resist the “Kiss Me” signs that many of the coeds held.

And on I went, basically a smooth run pretty much according to plan until mile 18 when reality struck—my “wall” had come a little early. My left hamstring had locked, a major cramp, like a solid cable, leaving me no alternative but to stop, limping to the curb and doing whatever I could to work it out. After a few minutes of self-massage, I switched to fast ChiWalking® until I was able to run again without reigniting the cramp. For several miles, including the infamous Heartbreak Hill (actually Heartbreak Hills if you count the three hills right before the actual Heartbreak Hill), I had to slow down my pace and run with increased knee bend so that I could keep going. Little by little, my projected finishing time rose as breaking 4 hours became an unreachable goal. I did feel good that, thanks to ChiWalking® and ChiRunning® forms, I was able to adapt to the hamstring problem and by the final 2 miles of the race, I had bounced back and was again running in good form. As I rounded the corner just before the final half mile stretch, my spirits were further lifted when I saw my Canadian support team cheering me on. I reached down deep, picked up speed and crossed the line looking a lot better than I felt. A 4:22 marathon—slower than I had hoped for but, nonetheless, I had achieved my lifelong goal. I had finished the Boston Marathon.

Postscript: Far up front, some amazing race times were being chalked up. Kenyan, Robert Cheruiyot, set a new course record by one second, in 2:07:13 while fellow countrywoman Rita Jeptoo finished in 2:23:38. American men made an impressive showing finishing 3,4,5 and nabbing 6 of the top 11 positions. For those Master’s runners among us (40+), it is worth noting that Sammy Nyangincha (Kenya) finished in 2:26:37 and Madina Biktagiroka (Russia) finished close behind in 2:30:06. For the sixth year in a row, Ernst Van Dyk from South Africa won the men’s wheelchair division (1:25:29) and Edith Hunkeler from Switzerland won the women’s in 1:43:42.

Keith is a certified ChiRunning® and ChiWalking® Instructor and works in Eugene, Oregon and the SF Bay Area.