

## CHINA NATIONAL MASTERS CHAMPIONSHIPS TANGSHAN

*Bill Purves*

To poo or not to poo? That was the question facing us before our first race, for no greater need has a runner than for a poo before a big race. More on this later. We were Tangshan and about to run after the disappointment of the postponement of the Championships back in May in the run-up to the Olympics.

The fun had begun back Wednesday night when the Hong Kong team assembled for a training run at the Sha Tin stadium and dinner. Great way to start the adventure. Glass of red in one hand, new team shirt in the other, and re-united with good running friends all excited to talk about past running feats and what lay ahead in Tangshan.

Thursday's flight into Beijing was smooth and the bus across to Tangshan took us through pleasant countryside where crops had just been harvested and trees, lots of trees, were losing their leaves in preparation for sleep over winter. It was now late autumn.

After an hour we were entering the Tangshan district. It was apparent that the porcelain industry was important in this region, with small factories and shops lining the road. I could see Denise getting excited: there was shopping to be had in this here town.

A little confusion in finding our hotel didn't matter. The driver's GPS was confused by all the roadworks and detours. All part of China's rapid growth. This just gave us the chance to view some of the back blocks. It was late enough in the day now for the small street stalls to be opening and begin cooking evening meals.

We passed the stadium, looked great: set back from the road in a large plaza and decorated with many coloured flags and banners fluttering in the breeze. The Jin Bin Hotel was just a few blocks on. We were there, a nice hotel, and easy walking distance to the track, thanks to Bill's meticulous planning.

By now Stephen's language skill in Mandarin had become apparent as he expedited check-ins, and in the days ahead sorted out meal orders and touring. Bill, always up for a walk and a beer, suggested we head back to the stadium to see if it might be possible to register for our events, before finding a local dining establishment.

Off we went into the late afternoon sunlight. But the sun had turned orange and could hardly pierce the grey skies and dust being blown about the streets. Was this the legendary air pollution of northern China, back now with a vengeance after the Olympics?

The stadium was locked but the caretaker reassuringly told us that, Yes, there was some sort of athletics on there tomorrow or the next day. Bill, ever keen to walk on, suggested heading to the event headquarters in a nearby hotel. The rest of us viewed the sky and said, maybe not, it is going to rain. Well it did, poured down for 10 minutes, accompanied by thunder and strong winds. We sheltered in the lee of the stadium till the rain turned to light drizzle, then it was on to hunt for a beer and dinner.

Nothing open along the streets near our hotel! But wait, next to the cop shop, down an alley, we were directed to the "Hole in the Wall". No fancy neon signs advertising this establishment. Hole in the Wall was a small family-operated restaurant under the arches next to our hotel. No, not under the "Golden Arches", although that ubiquitous hamburger chain and its other fast-food cousins were here and well patronised by the less discerning younger diners of Tangshan.

Local produce, freshly prepared in a wok over a blazing gas burner, soon began to fill the table. Little space left for bottles of local Tung beer. No problem. As soon as we emptied one, hold it up, and it was replaced by a full bottle.

Friday saw us up early queuing to register for our races. Well actually Stephen and Bill did the queuing. The rest of us watched the proceedings being conducted in Mandarin and had no idea of what was going on. So instead we investigated preparations for two wedding receptions to be held that morning in the hotel.

After an hour Stephen and Bill emerged with shirts, race numbers and the all-important program. We would now know who would be racing today. But no, late change in plans by the competition organizers: no races today; they will start tomorrow – Saturday, with a big opening ceremony (good) and finish Monday (bad). Competition had been scheduled to finish Sunday, not Monday, and we had prebooked our return flights for Monday.

Lots of rumbling followed. Could we change events? Not allowed! Where was the Ironman? He had quietly slipped into the hotel tourist office and came back with a plan to visit a section of the Great Wall, not far northeast from Tangshan. So it was, a team road trip to a remote section of one of China's most fabled pieces of history. And clean air! The storm had cleared the air so we could see the the wall stretching along ridgelines for miles off into the horizons.

Saturday, first day of competition. Check in. Find a toilet. Pew! Great stadium, shame about the toilets. Dark. Hole in the floor. Hold your breath, squat down and hope not to miss.

Rebecca was to run first, 10km on the track and a gold medal performance in her age group. Then Marc and Robert in the 1500m. Marc stayed with the lead pack until the end of lap 3, then surged ahead to take gold. In his age race, Robert tries the same tactic but alas falls back over the last lap to finish fifth. Then Stephen stepped up for 10km, just a warm-up he says. He prefers the marathon. This is faster than warm-up pace and Stephen runs well to finish just out of the medals.

Sunday, Clarence is on the track early, 400m, one quick lap. He runs well but in the fast competition of a National Championship finishes just outside the medals, but still happy with his run. And we have found some better toilets nearby.

Still plenty of time, so another road trip was in order, this time to the Eastern Qing Tombs, an hour's drive northwest of Tangshan. They were within a large garden estate that was once the exclusive retreat of the ruling dynasty. Ornate roadways to palaces remain where emperors received guests. Below multi-story monuments are the tombs of emperors, empresses and imperial concubines, with some tombs open for viewing.

Then on to the Xifenghu Reservoir for a cruise, and what's that? Another section of the Great Wall. This part arching down the spine of a ridge and disappearing into the waters of the lake.

Monday, what to do? Robert and Marc are scheduled to race the 800m, the bus is ordered, there is a plane to catch in Beijing, and not much time to spare.

Nothing for it. Everyone packs their bags, then it's off to race. Marc is on first, leads through the first lap but has some competition chasing him. Can he sustain his speed? He looks around, digs deep and pulls ahead to take his second gold medal. Robert is up next, goes out hard and leads early, asking questions of the competition. They respond in the second lap to pass Robert and his tiring legs, for him to again pick up a fifth place finish. Must hurry to get the bus. But there are photos to be taken.

That's masters athletics, competitive out on the track, best friends afterwards, lots of handshakes and photos. And some fast driving got us to the airport in time to catch our flight back to Hong Kong. There was even time for Denise to buy some local porcelain plates during a pit stop on the way.

*Updated: Nov 2008*