

## The Standard Chartered Marathon Race Report

*By: Wynnie Fung*

42km is the distance that symbolises the rite of passage for a true distance runner. On 8 Feb 2009, I finally passed my rite of passage.

After fulfilling my 100km milestone race in 2008, I had set my goal on running my first marathon. I have never run such a long distance on the road and have never been too keen on road running. I had always considered myself more of a trail runner opting for the road less taken. However, after a series of injuries obtained along the trails, I resolved to be less adventurous and to stay off the beaten track (at least for a few months) for the sake of my marathon dream.

To be honest, it was only a dream as the months prior to the event was dedicated to entertaining the holiday season. The Christmas festivities, a trip to the infamous food obsessed Taiwan and an alcohol-induced ski trip to Japan were a few additions in the list of "damage done". With only 2 weeks left until to the race, I had only one long run of 32k under my belt; hardly an achievement as I had 10 extra kilometers to make up and not a clue how I would to pull that one out of the hat.

The final week arrived. I was exciting and nervous. I had set my eyes on 3h20 or under. But towards the end of the week, my expectations tumbled with a slight calf tear onset by a Sunday tempo run. I wondered why my body was so prone to injury.

On the morning of the race, I woke at 4am to make sure I had sufficient time to prepare. I taped salt packets onto my race bib and a swab of tiger balm (in case of knee pain) and three gels were doubly fastened to my shorts. In terms of logistics, I was prepared. Mentally, I was ready to battle, but physically, there was an element missing. I had joked that the convenient location of the finishing line would allow my parents to swiftly stretcher me home if need be. Even a taxi would be a more cost-effective for me than other unfortunate cripples as I lived across the park. However, despite my doubts, it was crunch time. It was time to face the beast. I was ready to do what it takes to conquer this beast and more importantly to come home in one piece.

The starting line was a human sea of skimpily clad runners. It was probably the only day of the year where such a sight of semi-nude could be witnessed in a public precinct. It was like a Mardi Gras parade in Hong Kong, except with runners of multiple gender orientations.

I squeezed through the crowd in the clammy heat, avoiding the whiff of BO which had already emanated from a few prematurely warmed up bodies. My special tactic in squeezing through the gaps in the crowd was quite effective, as not long after I had started at the back of the parade, I had found myself close to the front. There, I noticed a familiar face. Peggy Chan stood a few steps away and we exchanged "good lucks."

The runners around me were shaking their legs and exchanging final words. When the announcements were made, I doubt any attention was paid as all formalities were lost in the excitement and commotion. It was only until the countdown that most runners awoke from the sleepy drone in preparation for the bolt. The beep sounded and the crowd began to move. A few seconds later, gaps emerged and I could finally see the path ahead.

As I ran, I wondered why so many had chosen this path. Were we all masochists who loved to pursue the pain of enduring 42k of running? For a person of logic, it didn't make sense why anyone would love to hurt themselves. Then I realized it was for the passion and spirit. There's a very

special feeling; a great sense of pride and achievement once you cross the finish line that cannot be replaced. This was the reason why all those people were there, running together in unity.

The race started off at an easy pace. According to my pace chart, which was written on my arm with a biro, and which had soon melted away with the sweat, I was a minute too quick. I had tried to memorise the times but my inadequate mental capacity was unable to retain over three sections.

The first checkpoint was at 5k. The night before, after reading some last panic messages on HKrunners forum, I had been worried about the supplies at the stations. Rumours were expelled that a new isotonic Watsons drink would be available. I was worried because I didn't like Watson's sports drink to begin with. I'd much prefer another brand and only unless the drink is superbly discounted, I would consider drinking it at my expense. However, the new packaging was different from the bottled Isotonic usually seen in retail stores. It was similar to the Ribena 375ml packs. And only Ribena has been able to pull this packaging off as its sealable and amorphous nature, not to mention attractive colour, allow the cosmopolitan girl to conveniently place it into her purse. I wondered why such a product was adopted for the race as its degree of slipperiness and shape was absolutely inappropriate for runners prone to choking at high speeds. Perhaps it was a devious marketing ploy to push a new product into market. What better channel than an exclusive access to over 55,000 of its target segment?

My first attempt at drinking failed as I had squeezed too much liquid into my throat and ended up spluttering all the liquid I imbibed. I made a note to practice my drinking etiquette to imbibe more gracefully next time.

I ran alongside a runner who had run with me in Shek Kong. He mentioned that we had exchanged handshakes at the finish, but regrettably, my short-term facial recognition had failed me. Nevertheless, I was glad to be alongside another runner with similar pacing and really valued his company as the occasional word really lifted and motivated the spirit.

Running along a monotonous highway had brought no pleasure to the feet as well as the mind. With the absence of sources of interest, I often resorted to amusing myself in observing the characters in race: a group of sharks, a waiter running with a menu and an artificially bald head with protruding horns on a Japanese runner.

By 30K, I had slowed down significantly, I tried to use my positive energy to lift those flailing, staggering at 'the wall' around me. I would feel the despair of those trotting or even walking on the sidelines; unlucky front runners who had been stumped by the elements along the course.

Before entering the tunnel, my fore foot had started to ache; a signal that my body was not conditioned for the race as my inadequacy was beginning to surface. But it was okay. I could deal with anything as long as I did not cramp. Anything as long as my biomechanics did not fail. As I emerged from the 'black hole,' diving into the concrete jungle, I saw the 20min mark disappearing in the horizon. I looked at my watch and I was still hobbling at 38K. I knew that I didn't have a chance at 20mins and would be fortunate to roll in before the half mark. I desperately tried to dissociate from the twitching sensation, but it was hard with the lack of stimulus. My mind was in a semi-dazed state and towards the end, I just wanted to finish in whatever fashion possible, even if I had to hobble.

The cheer increased as I entered Lockhard road. I saw Bill and Sheila cheering on the sideline. Mr. Li Ho Tung on his bike shouted my name. I think I managed to wave to all of them but failed to respond vocally as I was trying to contain the cramps. As I entered Victoria Park, I heard my parents and brother calling my name. I hastily hobbled to the finish line where I was greeted by

Kitty with a camera to capture my wasted post-race look. My legs felt stiff, like a set of gears that had locked once the machine stopped moving. But it didn't matter. I was simply overwhelmed at the completion of my milestone race – with the time of 3 hours 27 minutes!

Now, the season is truly over for me. I can rest in the comfort that all major races are done and I can finally have time to heal. In the meantime, I can proudly claim to be a true marathoner. The SCM was a race that had marked an important beginning in my pursuit of the marathon dream. A dream that will hopefully last for a lifetime.

> Photo Clip – The True Marathon Face



*Updated: 26 Feb 2009*