

## THE LENGTHY LANES OF LONGFORD

*Running along the ground singing a song in the morning light  
All of the flowery fields as far as out of sight  
Turning your eyes to the clouds and the skies and the trees  
Cos you never know what you might see*

I see my Spartan-gifted Garmin tick through 14.33 miles and I'm still rolling along, all wheels turning. That's the first monkey off my back.

*Bank Holiday Monday June 2007, my first marathon. I've done the work (just) and I'm in fair shape as I line up on St Patrick's Street, Cork. Twelve miles later and I'm stepping off the course and binning my number. It's all gone horribly wrong and I simply can't go on. My good friends are sympathetic - 'Well I'd not be able to run 12 miles at all', 'Sure the air's different in Cork.' Etc.*

*The reality is that I've been stupid - not eaten properly in the last 48 hours, spent the day before the race walking the hills of Cork city, out along the Lee estuary etc. For which I pay the price that is, in retrospect, inevitable.*

*Bank Holiday Monday June 2008. Cork again. There are going to be no mistakes this time, they'll have to drag me off the course, blah blah. I have trained like a demon. My training mileage is up by 40% this year, including a half dozen runs of between 18-21 miles. This is my day of redemption. 14.33 miles later I have unbelievably come grinding to a halt once again. I've made several efforts to get going again but it ain't gonna happen. Distraught, embarrassed, I drag myself back to my hotel. My good friends are still sympathetic, but it's starting to wear thin. 'Maybe you should just enjoy your running, not put pressure on yourself.' Etc.*

*What went wrong? Firstly I reckon I left my legs up there in Dublin, in training. Secondly, I went off far too quickly - got chatting to a guy, it felt easy. So stupidity again.*

*So what's to be done? I've got no option. I can't let it beat me or I won't ever rest. I'm getting sick of it now but I sign up for Longford, Sunday 24th August 2008.*

So here I am again on a marathon start line. Since Cork I've cut back on the miles, I've been in the gym much more. cross training. I've de-toxed for the previous week, it's a nice cool late morning in the Irish midlands. Once again I'm confident despite my 100% failure rate. This time I have no time target - I've just somehow gotta get round this circular course, around to Roosky and back to Longford. I trot off very steadily, keeping an eye on the Garmin. Ten minute-miling or slower is the aim for the first part of the race. When I clock 9.44 for mile 2 I make an effort to slow down a bit, though this feels REALLY slow. No matter, that's how it's going to be today. Once we lose the half-marathoners at mile 6 it becomes a bit lonely out there - there are less than 300 in the race.

I'm not sure about this running on the hard shoulder of the main N5 - not my idea of the joys of running really. Whatever, I settle into the task in hand. A little chat here and there, but I'm careful not to get caught into running at someone else's pace. Through Tarmonbarry at 7.5 miles and off the main drag into some nice minor roads. Here and there families have set up unofficial drinks stations, with choc bars, sweeties etc. which is a nice touch. And it's rude to refuse after they've made the effort. I can't shake off an Aussie wheelchair guy who sweeps by me on the downslopes but who gets his come-uppance on the slightest of inclines. And through Roosky, halfway and 14.33 miles. Easy so far and I've stopped checking the watch as I'm confident I'm not going too fast!

Through 16, 17, 18 miles. The course is very well marked - just as well as the field is now spread far and wide and marshals are thin on the ground. I'm still running OK but it's starting to bite. I

relax by pretending I'm out for a training run and I can always have a little walk if I need to. But then I realise I haven't actually needed to yet. So that's my new target - no walk breaks.

20 miles and I'm smiling. It's no longer easy and I'm having to dig in. But by now I know that today it's going to happen. I'm passing a number of people now - a lot of suffering out there back down the field. And not many in the mood for small talk - I get several growls as runners, many now walking, go through their own private hells. So why do this sport then? I'm determined to enjoy every minute. Two girls giving out Jammy Dodgers - these are very hard to eat in the latter stages of a marathon. 22 miles - I'm into new territory here and on cue the pain intensifies. But nothing that's going to stop me now.

Back onto the hard shoulder as we approach Longford. It's like the March Of The Dead out here as us stragglers head for home. The happy beeping of traffic keeps me going as I wave back - I seem to be alone in this. And at Mile 25 we're off the main road and back into the town streets. My legs are begging me to stop but there's to be no walking. And finally, into the town centre and the blessed sight of the finish gantry which has the magical effect of making all pain disappear. Just time for a girly, teary moment as I get a bit of a clap and a cheer, and I've done it. 225th out of 270 - official time 4:47.14.

I guess I can now retire my Spartan vest with honour in favour of that of my new club Crusaders. But no more marathons. As WB Yeats said whilst sipping a sherry in O'Donohue's, Baggot Street, Dublin 'I have now seen an Irish bar and I have no wish to see another'.

**Roy McCarthy**