

Running the New Bedford Half Marathon



by Justin
Tonelli

So it's Friday afternoon, two days before the 34th New Bedford Half Marathon, and I've just completed my last training run in preparation for the big race. While running the familiar four-mile loop through the country roads of East Freetown and Rochester near my home I can't help but notice the small, dirty piles of snow that still litter the sides of the streets. They stand as a burning reminder of how tough the winter has been for people who enjoy running. It took a lot of dedication for me and my fellow runners to get out there and run through the cold and the snow. It's not easy to run an average of 20 miles a week for more than two months when it's snowing outside.

Running during the winter is quite dangerous. Running after work is also tricky because, as we all know, it gets dark around here at 4 P.M. I spent plenty of evenings squeezing in three or four-mile runs while wearing my head lamp and reflective vest. On the weekends I would usually get together with friends to get in our long run for the week. For us, this meant finding the local park or bike path that had the least snow and ice on it. The Fairhaven/Mattapoissett Bike Path and D.W. Field in Brockton were our favorites because by running at those places, it kept us off the snow-lined roads.



Justin running
hard for the
finish line.

Only this past couple weeks or so has the weather been really runner friendly. Last weekend offered us a glimpse of spring weather, which was perfect for my last long run before the race. Each year on the Sunday before the Half Marathon, the Greater New Bedford Track Club organizes a “fun run” for its members and friends. The run uses the half marathon route, with cut-offs at seven and nine miles to appease the mileage desires of all the runners. It was a great chance to get out on the course and get a feel for the challenge ahead.

One of the fun parts of training for longer races is to get out there and race at shorter distances. This really serves as a great measure of how well your training is going. I was able to do a five and a ten-mile race during my training. I saw many people out there that I knew would be running the New Bedford Half Marathon. During the five-mile race (which, I might add, had a race day temperature in the teens), I ran my fastest time I’d ever run over that distance. This accomplishment made me feel really good about how well my training was going, but I knew it was still early and I had a lot of work ahead of me.

Unfortunately, no training is without its ups and downs. Around the first week of March I came down with a pretty bad

cold that sidelined me for the better part of the week. That sort of stuff eats at you mentally because you work so hard for so long and your training suffers a little bit when things like this happen. Eventually I was able to beat the cold and get back on my training schedule. My next few runs were a bit painful, and breathing that cold, dry air really hurt, but you do what you've got to do.

Along with being sick, I've had a nagging knee injury that has been bugging me since last year. I've been pretty successful in keeping it healthy with lots of ice and a little rest and relaxation. These sorts of things, along with "life" getting in the way, can affect the way your training goes. I guess it's just the way you bounce back from all of it that separates you from the rest of the pack.

Race Day

I woke up at 8 A.M. on race day and I was pretty nervous and excited. I had my usual race day breakfast of toast with peanut butter and raisins to go along with my morning coffee; a perfect combination for an energy boost. I packed up some trail mix to snack on before the race and my packet of Gu Energy Gel for a mid-race pick-me-up, and I was ready to go.



Half Marathoners on Rockdale Avenue.

My running buddy (Nicky Kulig) picked me up and we heading to downtown New Bedford. I love using the buddy system for races, it makes them so much more fun. We found a nice sunny spot to stretch about an hour before the race. The temperature was in the upper 40's, but it felt so warm in the sun, I would have guessed it was closer to 60. Nicky and I discussed our race strategies while we loosened up. Having only run one half marathon before, she was just looking to best her previous time of two-hours. As for me, this race was my fourth at this distance and I was looking to best my time from last year of 1:31:01.

Fifteen minutes before the start of the race we headed over to the start area. We could feel this excitement welling inside us and all around us. We squeezed our way through the record crowd and got in our places to start the race. We happened to be right in front of the podium where the pre-race announcements were being made. We had a front row seat for the former Miss New Bedford's singing of the National Anthem, and of Mayor Scott Lang wishing all of the runners a good race. Almost immediately after this the horn was blown, signifying the start of the race.

Pre-race anxiety turned into exhilaration as we all jockeyed for position amongst the thousands of other runners. The adrenaline takes you through the first mile and a half or so of maneuvering through the sea of people, jumping up onto the curb to scoot around runners, cones, and parked cars. Only then do you settle down for the task ahead of you.

Personally, I was hurting. Although I warmed up pretty well, I was still a little stiff, and that made me uneasy. I had experienced this before and knew I just had to keep pushing until I got into a rhythm. Luckily for me I found this rhythm around the three-mile mark just before the first major hill on Hathaway Road. I powered up the hill just as I remember doing last year, and after that I was feeling good. From the timers set out at most mile markers I could tell that I was running a

little faster than the pace that I wanted to, but I was alright with that because I felt really strong.

Crossing over Rt. 6, I knew we were approaching one of my favorite parts of the race. The crowd on Rockdale Avenue at Buttonwood Park was huge. The people all crowded the street forming a lane down the middle of the road, which made me feel like I was the only one running this great race. Many people held signs to cheer on their friends and family. I found that it gave me a great morale boost for the second half of the race.



Running through New Bedford.

Of course you've heard of the saying, "getting your second wind." I think I got my "second wind" three or four times throughout the race; one of them came while running by the beaches in the south end of New Bedford. It can tend to get windy on this part of the course, but thankfully this race day we were spared. Around the seven or eight-mile mark, I decided it was time for a snack. I made sure I had a water station in sight and I broke out the Gu Energy Gel. This stuff is a carb-loaded gel that is quickly processed by the body to give you energy mid-race. I have used it many times on longer runs, rides, and triathlons, and have found it to be helpful. I felt better mentally knowing I had some more energy in store for the last few miles. I knew I would need it because the New Bedford Half saves its toughest challenge for last.

Once you pass the beaches in the South End you start to head up County Street, back towards downtown and the finish line. As 2,730 runners found out in the last mile and a half, County Street is uphill the entire way. Even though I had run this race and this hill before, I felt anxious about tackling this last test. On I went, up the hill, grunting and coughing, trying to stay focused on keeping my stride and steady breathing. I have to say that this hill was one of the most painful stretches of race that I have encountered in my short running career. I did my best to overcome the hill, and pushed on toward the finish line.

As soon as I started to round the corner onto Pleasant Street, I gave everything I had and broke into a sprint. I set my eyes on a few runners in front of me and tried to catch them. I passed two or three people and plowed across the finish while hearing the P.A. announcer calling out names of runners. Did he call my name? I have no idea. I was almost delirious with exhaustion as I stumbled forth to collect my medal and find some nourishment. I found some water and oranges and a place to collect myself. I knew I had beaten my time from last year's race, but I didn't know if I had set a personal record for myself. Turns out I did not, but I was still happy to have bested my time on this challenging course.



Smiles all around
after the race.

I then turned my attention to seeing some of my friends cross the finish line. Runners are a tight knit community and we find it just as rewarding to see others succeed as succeeding ourselves. Two of my friends, including my training buddy Nicky, posted personal records during the race, and I was super excited for them. Nicky and I greeted our family and friends and thanked them for all their support. It was really great to have them all out there cheering us on.

Also, it was wonderful to have the support of all of the local businesses as well. As we made our way to the YMCA for some post race grub we stopped at a couple local eateries for some free samples. The many restaurants and watering holes downtown made for great meeting spots for us after the race. We enjoyed some food and drinks at Pour Farm Tavern only a block away from the race finish. From there we had a post race soak in the hot tub and we were feeling no pain (for a moment). Although I fell slightly short of the goal I had set for the race, I still bettered my time from last year's race. From beginning to end I could not have asked for a more perfect day. The race staff, the area businesses, the spectators, the City of New Bedford, and most certainly the runners made this a race that I will not soon forget.