

The Long Road to the Blackpool Tower by Sue Bains

The journey to Blackpool started on 14 December 2015; the day after I won the South Yorkshire Cross Country Championship and League for the F55+ . It will finish (I hope) by 1:00pm on Sunday 24 April 2016 in Blackpool.

With just 5 days to go before the end, I want to get down on paper how I feel about this training block. Whatever the result, looking back knowing the result is going to influence the way I look at the training journey and I feel I should review it now when I still don't know if it works or not or even if I'm going to reach the destination.



My overall statistics are (with 10 miles and 3 sessions still to be done before the marathon)

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 2015: | 132.2 miles | 21 hours 50 mins | 3,980ft | 11 runs |
| 2016: | 738.5 miles | 126 hours 54 mins | 42,854 ft | 89 runs |
| Total | 870.7 miles | 148 hours 44 mins | 46834ft | 100 runs |

(This should end up including the marathon, at 906 miles and 105 runs)



My average pace has been 10minute 15 seconds per mile – now that sounds really SLOW!!

I've run in 6 pairs of trainers:

| | miles |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Asic fuji3(trail) | 83.26 |
| Skechers Ultra-2 nd pair | 17.49 |
| Blue nimbus 17 | 397 (now chosen to be the Marathon shoes!) |
| NB 1260 from SA | 46.48 |
| NB 1080D | 57.21 |
| Skechers Ultra | 210.28 |

Average heart rate throughout 143 bmp

Training Plan

I used Pfitzinger and Douglas's "Advanced Marathon" 18 week, up to 55 miles a week plan and kept as close as possible to the specified sessions with schedule rearrangements to fit around my commitments. I've done a few marathon/ultras before and had followed the sort of training plans that basically said to run 5 times a week with an increasing long run once a week. Through these I had achieved a best of 3:55:09 at Manchester 2013, but felt I had better than that in me. The P&D plan has an excellent world-wide reputation as a tough plan but one that works.... But who knows if it'll "work" for a 60 year old woman. The thought of an almost guaranteed PB attracted me to it – after all, how hard can it be? I love running and I am not afraid to run long. All I had to do was to do what it says!

Out of a number of options, I adopted the 18 week plan with up to 55 miles a week as this appeared to provide a sensible progression to the weekly distance and I was so keen to get going – and this would start really soon. My running buddy was dying from cancer but we had enough time together before she died to go through the plan, talk about it and make plans for how it would unfold. She had total trust that I would complete it and warned me that she would haunt me if I dropped off the plan after she died.

Jenny died on Christmas Eve 2015. I miss her dreadfully!

I set up my plan for 18 weeks of training and one "sick" week. This week was built in from the beginning as I thought it unlikely that I'd get through without some bug or other and I didn't want anything making me feel that it had become impossible.

In the weeks immediately before starting the plan, I'd gone out and trialled the various sessions, monitoring heart rate to get as accurate a measure as I could of Lactate Threshold, VO2 Max, Marathon Pace, Aerobic Pace and

Recovery Pace. The guidance for the heart rate zones from the book was probably aimed at runners considerably younger than me, but I don't feel the ones I calculated and worked to were too far away from being accurate.

Just in case I ever want to look back at what figures I used for each type of session:

Max HR **180**
Resting HR **48**

| Pfitzingers Calc | Using Max HR | | | | Reserve (diff btwn max & resting) | | | | Range | |
|------------------|--------------|-----|-------|-----|-----------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|------------|------------|
| | From | To | From | To | From | To | From | To | From | To |
| VO2 max | 93% | 95% | 167 | 171 | 91% | 94% | 168 | 172 | 167 | 172 |
| Lactic Threshold | 82% | 91% | 148 | 164 | 77% | 88% | 150 | 164 | 148 | 164 |
| Marathon Pace | 79% | 88% | 142 | 158 | 73% | 84% | 144 | 159 | 142 | 159 |
| Long/Medium run | 74% | 84% | 133 | 151 | 65% | 78% | 134 | 151 | 133 | 151 |
| General Aerobic | 70% | 81% | 126 | 146 | 62% | 75% | 130 | 147 | 126 | 147 |
| Max for Recovery | up to | 76% | up to | 137 | up to | 70% | up to | 140 | 137 | 140 |

As with any training block, I was very eager and excited to get started; 18 weeks (19 minus a sick week) seemed no time and I was impatient for the first Monday morning to arrive. 18 weeks down the line, I feel that I have been following this plan for my entire life; satisfied by a completed week every Sunday, but a feeling of exhaustion and trepidation on a Monday as another 50 mile plus week lies ahead.

The plan was in 5 sections (meso's?) and initially I knew what they meant, but as I went through, I looked back at the book less and less and I can say now that I really can't remember what each one was supposed to focus on. Endurance, Speed, Racing, Taper and Recovery I think (but I'd have to check in the book to be sure).

The different sessions

I have always found it incredibly hard to do "speed work" and without Jenny's back to chase, I was concerned whether I'd be able to do the sessions, but I found that I really enjoyed the concept of the longer run with 100m strides scattered along the route. Running nearly flat-out (actually at my 1 mile pace) for 50 steps was a challenge and trying to keep the pace the same for each allowed me to maintain interest and enthusiasm. I never really sorted out when I should do these strides – near the start of the run just after I'd warmed up, then run the rest of the route with tired legs; spreads out evenly throughout the route; or towards the end of the run to completely finish me off. In the end I settled for doing them when I was on flat-ish, firm ground. Sheffield running in winter doesn't offer the most level or dry paths (except on the roads) so it seemed a sensible thing to do.

Running at Lactate Threshold was quite hard. I think this was the session where I was least accurate on my heart rate range and I think I may have done some of them too fast – feeling like a 5k race – and others too slow where I felt as though I was hardly running fast at all. However, I did like the idea that these miles were sandwiched in the middle of a longer run so once they were completed, it was a pleasant – though tired – run back home.

VO2 Max running was something I think I did badly. I'd been told that this should be my 3k pace – but I've never raced a 3k so tried to do it at my 5k pace. However, lack of motivation / ability / flat road / clear pavements / whatever made these sessions feel somewhat incomplete. I tried substituting a Parkrun for one of them (there weren't that many actually) but was then told that 3 x 1600m at VO2 max is not the same training effect as one lot of 3 miles at VO2 max. Referring back to the book, I learned that the VO2 max sessions were probably the least important of any session, so gave up worrying and just tried to run really fast for a bit!

Long / medium runs and Aerobic runs were the bread and butter of the plan. Lots and lots of slow miles keeping the heart rate low. These were great if I was on my own or with others who were running at the right sort of pace, but I found it impossible to do these with larger groups, forcing myself stay at the back and maintaining the correct HR range. Some of the worst runs came from trying to do this – until I gave up and stopped trying! I found it takes a lot of self-confidence to run really slowly. I felt I looked old and lethargic and that "people" were judging my running ability by the pace at which they passed me. I felt as though I would never run at a decent pace again! Initially I hated it, but I think I have got better, particularly after doing a few tune up races and discovering a faster pace was still there in my legs.

Recovery runs I found to be nearly impossible to control at first. Living on a hill meant that I could barely do half a mile before my heart rate was above the “recovery” zone. As time progressed, my fitness improved and I could maintain the heart rate – near the top of the range, but I question whether this was also a factor of age. If your maximum heart rate goes down with age, then it must be more difficult to stay in the recovery zone without standing still!! I settled for my Average Heart Rate across the whole recovery run staying in the recovery zone as being the best I could do.

There were sessions which asked for some miles to be run at “marathon pace” and again, this was difficult as I wanted these to prove to me that I could do 8:36 minute miles, but I found that unless I was near the top of the heart rate range I couldn’t get below 9 minute miles – at best. This is something that still concerns me, but as I won’t be looking at heart rate at Blackpool, it is a great unknown that only post-race analysis will show. My marathon pace heart rate (according to my many spreadsheet analyses), should average 156 – we’ll see!

In my last “long run” of 8 miles with supposedly 4 miles at marathon pace (though I actually did 7 miles at marathon pace!), I ignored the heart rate and just went for the pace I wanted and found it relatively easy to maintain. This was an enormous confidence booster and exactly what I needed at this moment. I think sometimes it’s necessary to do what your brain needs rather than doing exactly what the written word says.

Tune up races

The plan required some tune-up races in the third meso and these took some planning. Finding a final 10k on the specific date was impossible without travelling miles, and I had to settle for one a week earlier which felt wrong but not something I could afford to worry about. I planned to take part in 6 races during the programme.



The first (Ribble Valley 10k) was on the day after Boxing Day but was cancelled due to flooding – a real disappointment particularly after having passed a “sensible” Christmas!

The next race was a half marathon (Liversage) which I did to replace a session requiring “12 miles at Marathon Pace”. This appeared a good idea when entering, but my competitive nature and the extremely hilly profile of the race made me a very annoying companion as my Garmin alerted me every time my heart rate exceeded the top of the marathon pace range – which was every few seconds! In spite of these issues, I was extremely encouraged by both my finish time and the pace I was maintaining on the flat sections of the course within the heart rate range. Coming second in my age group was a nice bonus – although I can’t help wondering if I’d have won the age group if I’d allowed myself to RACE!

A parkrun (Concord, Sheffield) was my 3rd race and I used it as a (poor) substitute for 6 miles with 5x800m @ VO2 Max. I certainly ran hard and with it being a small parkrun, there were few runners to chase, so again I was encouraged by both time and finishing first in age group.

The next race was the Great Northern Half Marathon – not the famous Newcastle festival, but based on an old railway line near a pub of the same name, in Derby! It was a freezing cold day and warming up was difficult with no area where there was sufficient space – or privacy – to do drills or strides, so the first mile was horrible. However, I’d set my watch to alert me if I went below 8:25 pace which turned out to be one of the best decisions I’d made as there were so few people in the race that I ran the last 4 miles with no one in sight in front of me and it would have been incredibly easy to give up fighting. Again I won my age group and was pleased with 1:47:43 as a raced time. The fact that it was at the end of a 56 mile week made it even more of a boost. No taper or even a day off!! AND a long run the next day to look forward to!



I had to abandon the 5th race – the Ashby 20. Catching “man-flu” left me with a hacking cough and totally unable to run for the seven days I’d allowed for being poorly. It was a blow as this was intended to be a real test of fitness and pace for the marathon. It took more than a week after this to get back to feeling fit, but not doing it was definitely the right decision.



My 6th and final tune-up race was the Wakefield 10k. After the week off I visited a physio and had a deep tissue massage which left me bruised and very sore, but slightly looser than before! I was a bit concerned about racing with bruised calves but was assured it would be OK, although as I warmed up before the race, I was in agony and seriously considered dropping out. However, frugal as ever – I'd paid for petrol and finishers t shirt – I started the race at a very conservative pace (for me in a 10k) and only upped the pace in the second half as I felt everything was feeling OK. A finish time of 48:54 may be 3 minutes outside my PB but I was happy with it (and the age group prize) and again proved that I could race with tired legs (and a sore toe joint!)

It's hard to do justice to races when you're tired and in some ways the fatigue provides a mental excuse for doing less than your best. Could I have run faster / harder? I don't know. I have read of people doing the P&D plan getting PBs for every race, but I never felt in PB shape and the eternal fatigue prevented me from believing I could have performed better. However, it was good to do races that didn't really matter and in some way has helped overcome my usual pre-race nerves. Yes, I am still nervous before a race, but I never got to the "give me any excuse not to do it" state that I've got to many times in the past.

The long runs

This was a programme that demanded lots of long runs. I'd heard (and seen on Fetch Everyone) that your 5 longest runs should total 100 miles. That figure haunted me, especially in the last few weeks after I missed the 20 mile race and my total hovered around 98 miles. I HAD to go out and do a 21 miler, just to get over the magic figure. An 18 miler the week after raised it to a smidgen over 102miles (phew!).

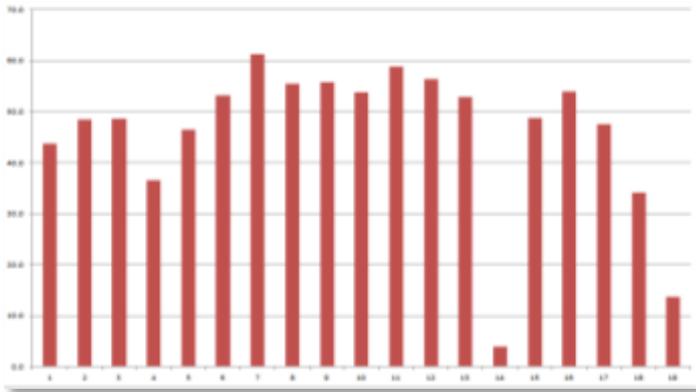
I had no problem with the long run distance and quickly got up to the 20 miler. What was hard was doing the "medium long" run as well each week. In all previous training programmes a long run was the only one that got into double figures each week, but in this plan, the second long run added to the constant feeling of fatigue. Runs at 8 – 10 miles made up the other sessions – with a speedy bit thrown in – so there was no respite, ever!

I've always enjoyed training in the winter and although we haven't had the snow and ice of previous years, we have had some horrendous wind and wet days. The worst conditions were during the 18.6 miles of "Round Sheffield by dual carriageway" during which I drowned my ipod, soaked up kgs of additional water and possibly increased the probability of catching a cold. An interesting run, but not one for site-seeing!

Actually saying that, the long run from the top of the Woodhead Pass back to Sheffield during Storm someone-or-other was incredibly tough. Lorries were blown over and the Pass closed to traffic as the Smiley Paces went to meet Jo Brand on her walk across the Trans Pennine Trail and I leapt out of a car at Dunford Bridge and ran home, buffeted by gale force winds the whole way.

The hardest was probably the 21 that I snuck in before the end; a triangular route down the Tissington trail, across country and back up the High Peak trail – all of which I have done before, though usually the other way round. The cross country path was stoney and extremely uncomfortable underfoot and the never ending High Peak trail was crossed by regular gates each of which required me to slow down, stop and open, go through, close, then get running again – a hard thing to do with 16 plus miles in my legs. However, I did it and as that was the run that allowed me to cross the magic 100 line, it was worth the pain.

P&D classify anything above 16 miles as "long" and 12-16 miles as "medium". My Long runs were: 22.1, 21.21, 21.20, 19.04, 18.62, 18.02, 16.66, 16.45 and 16.41. The "medium long" runs are far too numerous to list!



The weekly mileage

The number of miles run each week is also a factor into the chance of achieving a PB and with no advice on suitability for the “older” runner, I launched into the “up to 55 miles a week” plan.

18 weeks later with about two thirds of them around and above 50 miles and a maximum week of 61 miles, I know I felt close to breaking at times. In some ways the sick week came at the right time as I was feeling desperately tired and starting to dread waking up to face yet another demanding session. I have to question whether age should come into the equation – it’s easy to say that age

is just a number, but I know that I get tired more easily than I did 10 or even 5 years ago. Snoozing after lunch became pretty much a regular occurrence and I was rarely awake after 11pm, sleeping through to 6:30am or so.

I used these runs to trial gels, blocks, drinks, rucksacks, waistbelts, caps, buffs, gloves, shoes, socks..... There were far too many variables – I’d have needed a 50 week plan to trial them all properly.

Tapering!

I’ve always hated tapering. It stops me from running when I want to and gives me a feeling of being sluggish and lethargic. I’ve always had energy in my legs that fights to get out and have often spent the taper period telling everyone that “I’ll start it tomorrow”.

This time has been totally different! I knew that I was tired to the point of exhaustion and that, if I am to finish Blackpool in anything like a good time, I have GOT to get the energy back in my legs. Waking up on the Monday of the first taper week was sheer bliss! No medium long run to do, no Wednesday long run, just a 32 mile week to look forward to. Bearing in mind that I used to do an average of 30-35 miles a week, 32 would have felt like a normal week in previous programmes, but in this one the drop from 50 to 32 was enormous and I immediately started to feel the energy seeping back in.

I’ve cut back dramatically on distance, but maintained the frequency of runs, incorporating strides into every run. These have felt good and although I am experiencing the usual fear of never being able to run 26.2 miles if I feel like this after 5 miles, I know that is a fallacy that is sent into our brains to scare us away from the startline. I am fixating on starting pace, changing pace, weather, wind, loo stops and every other possible factor – some controllable, but most not! But that’s normal and I know it’s nothing to do with the plan.

What I’ve never experienced before is the sense of internal satisfaction that I have completed the plan and I’m just about in the right condition to race. I’m excited about it and not fearful. I know that excitement and anxiety are supposed to be the extremes of the same hormone release in your brain, and if that’s true, then I’ve moved a long way back along the continuum. I’m not in any way complacent but I am confident that I will be able to give it my best shot. I’m not even stressing about the time really – I know I’ve done everything possible and if that means I do the target time, then that’s wonderful. If I don’t manage it, then I think I will have to accept that it just isn’t going to happen. No one can take away my Manchester sub-4 hours and if that’s my running career highlight then – so what?

Tapering has allowed me to put the whole thing into a perspective that I think is far more healthy than I’ve experienced previously – as long as the nerves don’t build much more.....!

So... what do I think or the plan?

The positives are that it is an extremely easy plan to understand and provided you can fit it around other life-commitments, it is all you need. If, like me, you are a runner who loved to run but hates doing “speed sessions”, then the integration of speedy bits into the longer runs was the best solution I’d found. I have enjoyed it, though I take my hat off to anyone who completes it whilst holding down a 9-5 job or running a busy family life!

The negatives are that it is relentless, demanding and unforgiving! You can’t “dabble” in it – it’s an all-or-nothing plan and totally dominates every waking hour – either planning when or where you’re going to do the next session,

doing it or trying to perform daily duties in a state of utter exhaustion at times! Running on tired legs became the norm – but not something that is pleasant or that I want to repeat!

Doing it on your own is hard and I think I would have benefited from having a running partner to share the experience with. Not necessarily doing the sessions together, but to use as a sounding board about such things as feeling tired all the time, sluggish running paces, organising the speed sessions and all the other bits that I've whittled about. In the last few weeks a younger runner from Smileys signed up for Blackpool and took on a 9 week customised plan including some elements of the L&D 12 week plan – but she is naturally much faster than me and although we enjoyed a few runs together, and have shared our taper maranoia through frequent emails, I think I really need another Old Bird to get the real benefit from a running partner.



The best, the worst, the most and least effective?

As I've said, I think the best aspect of the plan was in its do-ability! Apart from the logistical struggle with the VO2 Max sessions, everything was easy to plan and implement. Mileage was specified and the purpose of each session was clear and easy to understand.

My best session out of the 103 is probably the 21 mile long run where I finished the last two miles at half marathon pace. This hadn't been prescribed, but I felt so good at 19 miles that I just wanted to stretch out and run fast. I think this run made me believe that I actually was getting better and my endurance was building well beyond anything I've achieved before.

The worst session has to be a mid-week medium run where (again not in the plan) I had read an American coach describe their best marathon training session as one where they ran at marathon pace for 5-6 miles, stop DEAD for 10-15 minutes until everything ceases up, then do 5-6 miles at marathon pace. The idea being that it was supposed to simulate the last 6 miles of the marathon.

So I tried it! On a freezing cold day, with icicles hanging from the tunnel entrances on the Monsal trail, I set out at marathon pace. The cold and freezing wind made it extremely difficult to maintain the pace and I struggled to the 5.5 mile point, which I had calculated to be a gap on the trail of about 100m between two long tunnels. I stopped and leant on the wall at the side overlooking a stream tumbling down into the main river below. The sun hadn't reached the gap, but there was some shelter from the wind. I had a drink and a gel whilst waiting but slowly got colder and colder. After 10 minutes I felt I had to set off or I would freeze to the spot, so I turned and started as pacey as I could into the tunnel.

I was not prepared for the resulting feeling! The world started spinning, I felt sick and dizzy and I could feel myself lurching across the path and back. Being totally dark and only lit by dim lights in the roof of the tunnel, it's easy to lose your sense of reality, but this time I felt I'd lost balance and even started wondering whether I was going to be OK to get back to the car! However, I kept going and after a few miles at a slow pace, felt sufficiently better to up the pace a bit.

Talking about this to people with some medical expertise, the view was that when I stopped in the cold, the blood moved to my major organs to try to keep them warm and therefore my head/brain was receiving less than its due. By starting off so suddenly, my brain was insufficiently stocked and hence the dizziness – helped along by the dark of the tunnel. I shan't be doing that session again!! If I feel half as bad as that at mile 20 of the marathon, I will STOP for GOOD!!

The most effective is hard to judge but probably doing the strides during the longer runs have given me the effect of speed training but without the half-heartedness that I would usually approach it with. Some is better than none I think.

The least effective were probably the VO2 Max sessions – I did them so badly that I'd be surprised if they had any positive effect. The book did say that these were not as important as other sessions, so I don't feel at all discouraged by my failure.

What time can I do? Predicting marathon time.

The book never attempted to predict marathon time. This seemed slightly strange at first, but I soon realised that if you are following a heart rate programme, then it's your heart that will determine your pace, not some arbitrary target. However as I have always used predictor calculators to assess my race performance, I knew what I wanted from the start. In the last few weeks, that target has appeared less and less likely and yet in some ways more and more possible!

Using my calculations

This is using the position I believe I am in at the end of the training programme taking Heartbeats per mile and average heart rate from my last run at marathon pace. It fits well with Heart rate data from other recent races.

| | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| | HR per mile | | | Av HR |
| Marathon projection | 1350 | 26.2 | 8:39mins per mile | 156 |
| = total beats | 35370 | In a time of: | 227 mins = 3 hours 47 mins | |

Using independent sources

Average of all below: **03:48:35** At an average pace: 8:43

| Source | From half marathon time 1:47:44 (Mickleover half) | from 10k time 48:57 (Wakefield 10k) | From mile pace |
|---|---|--|----------------|
| http://www.marathonguide.com/fitnesscalcs/predictcalc.cfm | 3:45:38 | 3:47:20 | |
| https://www.mcmillanrunning.com/ Macmillan | 3:46:44 | 3:49:40 | |
| www.nomeatathlete.com/marathon-prediction 6:50 * 1.3 = pace per mile then times by 26.2 | | | 3:52:45 |
| http://www.runnersworld.co.uk/general/rws-race-time-predictor/1681.html (Reigel) | 3:44:36 | 3:44:57 | |
| http://www.fetcheveryone.com/training-calculators-improvedriegel.php?hours=1&minutes=47&seconds=44&update=Update | 3:59:42 | | |
| http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2014/10/running_calculator_introducing_slate_s_marathon_time_predictor_a_better.html | 03:53:48 | <i>(This one takes training volume into account)</i> | |
| http://www.runningforfitness.org/calc/racepaces Age grading | 3:53:56 | 3:50:42 | |
| http://www.runningforfitness.org/calc/racepaces VO2 Max | 3:43:16 | 3:44:54 | |
| http://www.runningforfitness.org/calc/racepaces Reigel | 3:44:35 | 3:45:11 | |
| http://www.runningforfitness.org/calc/racepaces Cameron | 3:48:55 | 3:49:21 | |

So.... Who knows! What will be will be, but the overall message is that the 3:45 target is not totally unreasonable, although it is a challenging one. I have made the decision to go out at 3:45 pace and hold on as long as possible, dropping back if I really, really can't keep it going. What's to lose? I'll still get the same t-shirt!!

In sickness and in health – mental and physical

I am not setting up my excuses, but I think the state of a body – physical and mental – is crucial to success so a short analysis of this aspect is worth reflection.

Jenny's last weeks were hard and from the start of the plan to the day of her funeral were mentally draining. Whilst she was in the Hospice, I tried to visit her every day for an hour or so and her daughter was over from America and

needed a lot of support, so I had to fit my running around these commitments. Jenny had always believed that I had a much faster marathon in me than I had so far proved and one of our last coherent conversations was about the training plan and her views on my potential. In some ways, this marathon became my last thank you to her for everything she'd taught me about running and I still hope I will do justice to her memory – although I know she would always accept whatever I achieve provided I do my best.

After she died and Christmas was over – and my 10k race cancelled, I caught some sort of bug and spent a few days feeling dreadful. However, once the funeral was over and her daughter left for America I felt that I needed to move on with my life, but also felt I was in a void of having no one to talk to about my running who really understood me in the way she did. I have some lovely friends and a very supporting family, but a close friend is one who you can text with information about a blister or a disappointing pace.... And who will come back with a friendly positive spin – no big deal, just a warm contact. Because we were always somewhere in our own training plans, we shared so much of our progress and it was strange having no one to share that with – and I tried hard not to deluge my family or Facebook with needy messages.

Support from The Smiley Paces has helped tremendously and in particular Naomi's companionship on weekly Monday runs has become increasingly important to me. Running a club competition (Smiletastic 2016) took hours each week which gave me a new challenge to pass the time.

Physical health was surprisingly good. I took daily supplements – Barocca and a Glucosamine and Fish Oil capsule and attended a weekly strength and conditioning session. My left foot has been a problem for a number of years with a Morton Neuroma removed in September 2014. The long term effect of this is that, as the mileage increases, the swelling in my foot increases. Provided my shoes were loose enough to accommodate the swelling, there was little pain – I could run through it! Cutting the front of a £130 pair of trainers was no problem to me, although it does look very scruffy!

However, in the latter part of the training, I developed a sharp pain in the big toe joint which was extremely uncomfortable and almost impossible to run through – causing me to shift my weight and foot position to minimise the acute pain shooting through the front of the foot every time my heel hit the ground. Going downhill became a real issue. Somehow I discovered that by putting toe spacer between my big toe and the next one, the pain was controlled. Maybe after the marathon I will look into this....

From the start I had allowed a "sick week" as I've rarely got through spring without a cold or flu. Picking up my youngest from University after he phoned to report he had 'flu and bringing him home to be looked after made it almost inevitable that I would catch it and true to form, I went down with some chesty unpleasant illness just at the time where I was at the peak training weeks and the 20 mile race coming up. Taking 7 days off was no problem, but I'd only allowed 7 days and HAD to get back on track the next week! It was strange that before I'd caught the cold, I had no stiffness or niggles, one week of inactivity left me with an extremely stiff leg / hamstring / glute and even after two physio visits, the stiffness still hasn't gone. I don't know if it was the cold, stopping training at such a peak time, an inevitable result of the demands of the programme, just bad luck or a knock on effect of the toe joint pain and the way I compensated for it during those long runs.

So with 2 days to go, I feel mentally and physically ok. Not 100%, but not in any way bad enough to use it as an excuse.... Possibly. Rolling ... Stretching... it'll be fine!

Two days to go

A few days ago I said that no one could take my Manchester sub-4 marathon away from me! What a joke!! Never say Never!

Yesterday I discovered my 2013 Manchester Marathon time, that I have been so immensely proud of for the last 3 years, has been "removed" from my Power of Ten record as it was a "short marathon" – short by 380m. I now have no marathon PB, so looking at the bright side, provided I finish Blackpool marathon on Sunday, I will achieve a PB. In reality I am extremely upset, feeling in some way that I have cheated and lied every time I have bragged about my sub-4 marathon. With drugs cheats holding on to their medals to avoid embarrassment for the governing bodies, how much easier it must be to show the sport of Athletics as being honest and transparent, than to rob the grass root runners of their hard fought victories for a mistake that wasn't our fault.

The race

We travelled to Blackpool on Saturday having booked the Saturday and Sunday night in a B&B, and spent the Saturday afternoon going up and down the seafront looking at the Marathon course from the comfort of the tram. Night before nerves were helped by a good meal at an Italian restaurant – although I only had a pizza, worrying that the pasta sauces may be too rich – then back to the B&B for an early night.



Everything had been prepared on the Saturday, so there was little to do in the morning except shower and dress. It was freezing and the wind was blowing down the prom as I waited for the tram. The only other people around at that time in the morning were runners and with the vague instructions, there were a variety of views on where we should get off the tram. However, I followed the majority and arrived at the start line with just under an hour to go.

I have rarely felt so cold before a race. There was no shelter from the wind and I decided I'd have to start warming up early as I could feel my temperature dropping. I had been uncertain about how much warming up to do, and with additional time now I knew I had to be careful not to overdo it, so jogged extremely slowly for about 10 minutes, then did a good few drills keeping them slow and stretching without using too much energy. I finished with 3 lots of strides – again slower than normal, but still faster than race pace – then after unknowingly pushing in front of a massive toilet queue, went to the start line.

440 people finished the marathon – quite a small field – and it was soon apparent there were no pacers or even finishing time signs – just a free for all start. Vicky rushed through from the loo queues just before the start and we had enough time to wish each other luck and for me to tell her not to wait for me! As if!! I always like to focus on the coming race as I stand waiting for the start and a woman behind telling me that she was from Sheffield received an unfriendly grunt in return (sorry!).

A count-down from ten and the marathon was off – with the Half-marathon off in the opposite direction! We hared along the prom, skidded round a 180° bend, back up the prom into the wind for about half a mile, then up the ramp onto the main promenade road and turned south towards the Tower for the first of 4 pass-bys!

I'd set one of my watches (yes! I was wearing two!) to tell me my quarter mile split times and had a target of maintaining 2:09 or less. The first one was 1:57, followed by several more in the low 2's. At 3 miles I knew I had to slow down or pay the price later, although I also realised that until 5 miles, we had the wind behind us, so I settled into a more realistic 2:05 sort of pace.

At about 3.5 miles I passed our hotel for the first time and had one of my few personalised call-outs! I was feeling good. Once past the massive roller coaster at the Blackpool Pleasure Beach, we were into B&B suburbia which lasted down to the turnaround at 5 miles, where I caught sight of Vicky powering her way back northwards.

A quick shout to each other was sufficient to make me feel good.



Turning at 5 miles, I felt the strength of the wind against me as I started the 6.5 mile route north. It didn't really cause a problem at this stage – legs were still fine and although it must have taken additional effort, I managed to maintain my sub 2:09 quarter mile pace.

A short way on this first northward section, I passed the hotel again and waved as I saw husband Jes, and was surprised he wasn't wielding his camera.

“Your race bag's been stolen” he shouted “I'll get some more drinks. What do you want?”

“Electrolytes and Ginger” I bellowed back.

This wasn't what was supposed to happen! The bag had contained two drink bottles made up with an electrolyte tablets and Ginger cordial – a well trialled formula; gels; spare hat (it was very windy) and list of times and paces with a map. Nothing of any real value, but invaluable to my meticulous planning!

I learned later that during my going from 7 miles up to the top north turning and back down to about 17 miles, he bought two bottles of water from a shop, went through my suitcase and found a couple of gels and two tubes of tablets – Berocca and SIS Go. Having no idea which I'd meant he looked at the nutritional information and decided Berocca had more contents than the other tube so went for a tab of that in one bottle. In the other, he put Ginger cordial deciding that I couldn't possibly want it mixed (I did!). I can only imagine the agony he went through worrying about losing my race provisions and my sons at the end of the phone unmercifully mocking him that it would be his fault if things went wrong. As the list of times and paces were also in the stolen bag (I do hope the thief gets a lot of pleasure from them!) he had no way of keeping information flowing to the family apart from to tell them that I was still smiling. “Run alongside her and see if you think she's running fast” was a suggestion from one son! Looking back, I am sure it made no difference and probably taught me a lesson not to rely on pedantic organisation... just in case!!

Anyway, I carried on north oblivious to the commotion going on behind me.

Suddenly I heard the sound of cowbells! No sooner had my memory connected the sound with a previous Smiley Paces race celebration, than I came upon a friend from the running club with her partner – all the way from Sheffield to cheer us on! That's true friendship! There is nothing like applause from supporters to make you feel that you want to run hard for them. Vicky's family were the next for me to pass, shouting their encouragements – superb!

The race had been advertised as “Passing all the sights of Blackpool” but what it didn't say was that those sights were all well within the middle two miles of the course length! That left about 1.5 miles in the south end and about 3 miles at the north end to run up and down with NOTHING to look at! Few people, no landmarks, just B&B's, houses and sea views! The roads had been closed to cars, but not to pedestrians and unfortunately, Blackpool tourists didn't seem like keen marathon spectators, feeling quite comfortable walking across the road directly in front of us!

Once past the Tower (for the second time) and then past the start/finish area where a number of supporters lined the roads, it was out of the town up onto the bleak clifftops with hazy profiles of the Lakes in the far distance and the cranes at the northern turnaround point looking tiny a few miles ahead.

A man holding out a tub of sweets thrust two jellies into my hand and without thinking I put both into my mouth, instantly regretting it as they clamped my teeth together. What is the point of doing a spreadsheet of nutrition down to the last gram of carbohydrate if I'm going to eat random stuff from spectators? Duh!!

Passing the 9 mile marker I saw the 21 mile marker ready for the second lap. That is a sight that brings home just how far there is to go and how thankless a two lap route is!

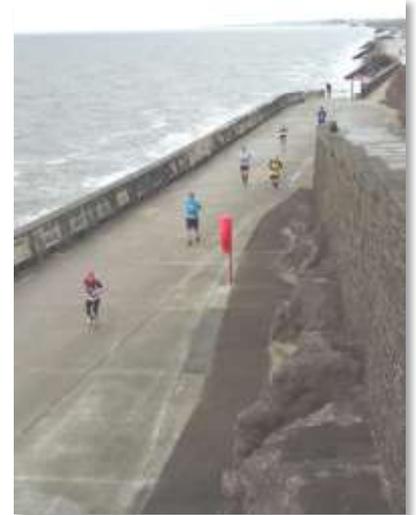
One of the features that had attracted me to Blackpool was that it was flat, and it was – nearly! There were some nasty little ups and downs on the cliff path that knocked energy from your legs and just made it a bit more difficult. At last I reached the northern end and swung down the slope and onto the



sea front pathway. The wind was coming from behind now and it was heartening to feel I was running at the specified pace without fighting the elements!

“Will the end ever come?” gasped a woman beside me.
I couldn’t help myself! “I’ve still got another lap to go!” I gasped back.
“Sorry” she said as I passed her.

The Half Marathon and full had started at the same time and place, but with the full making a southwards loop before joining the Half’s route but having covered an additional mile. This meant that throughout the entire first lap, I was passing Half Marathoners who were running far slower than my marathon pace. I don’t know how it could have been organised, but I would have liked to have been running alongside the 1:50 half marathoners so that we could have benefitted from each other’s pace rather than demoralising the slower runners by constantly passing them.



At 13 miles, the half marathoners peeled off and the full marathoners took the ramp back up onto the road to start the second lap.

It suddenly became quieter with the remaining runners spread out along the road. For a while I ran along with a group of 4 or 5 men, but their pace was too fast and I knew it would be a mistake to try to keep up with them, so I dropped back and maintained my 2:09 fairly easily. Pass the Tower for the 3rd time – I was beginning to dislike it now!

At 17 miles, I was back at the hotel and saw Jes at the roadside waving bottles at me.

“Berocca or Ginger?” he shouted

It didn’t take a lot of thought to shout “Neither!” and carry on making the decision that I’d make the electrolyte in my current bottle last and take water from each station.

The Pleasure Beach was in full swing by this time and screams came regularly from the rides. Out into suburbia and down to the turnaround again with another sighting of Vicky looking strong and purposeful heading back up northwards. As I came out of the turn and back onto the Prom, the wind and cold rain hit me, buffeting me backwards for a second. I was ready for another gel and had got one out of my waistbag so made a decision to slow down, have the gel and when I had got my breath back, to pick up the pace again. I “ate” the gel, slowed down the pace a little and headed towards the hotel to greet Jes and pick up the next lot of gels.



What I hadn’t realised was that the gremlins in my brain had allowed my body to get its way and had slowed down and no way was it going to let my running brain overcome its success and allow me to speed up again! My watch had been set to alert me if my pace slowed below 9 minute miles and I quickly realised the persistent beeps were going to drive me mad – and possibly drain the watch battery, so I turned off the minimum pace alert deciding I could use the pace measures instead. Looking back I know that this moment of mental weakness was not terminal and from my finishing time, I know it didn’t do any major damage, but I wish I had waited just a bit longer to settle into a pace against the wind and rain before I had the gel. I think the combination of sorting the gel AND the weather gave my gremlins all the excuses they needed to overcome any mental strength holding me to my pace.

“Smile! Your support group are just up there!” shouted a runner from the other side of the road and a few minutes later I heard the cow bells and the screams of encouragement. I needed this so

badly and it allowed me to pick up the pace a little.

Past the Tower for the 4th time. Never again will I have to run past it! then past the start/finish area, now with a few more spectators; many of them Half-marathoners who had finished their race.

Just let me get to the turnaround. The thought circled through my mind feeling that once I turned away from the wind, I would be able to run faster. I started to do calculations in my head as the 3:45 target seeped away. What pace did I need to do to get a sub-4? This appeared achievable and spurred me on as I kept promising myself that I would do just one more fast mile, then reassess. I can stop this pain at any time now was a constant promise to myself but in knowing this, it becomes easier to continue with it – strange!

Suddenly Jes popped up beside me, a tram on the other side giving me the clue to how he had got there! How lovely to hear a supportive voice!



The last two miles to the turnaround were so hard, lightened only by seeing Vicky heading into her final couple of miles down on the sea front path. I'd be there in a short while! Other runners around were suffering – a young woman being egged on by what appeared to be her father, a man clutching a cramped calf desperately trying to get back running, an older man bent over head facing down just digging deep into the remaining strength.

"You're doing great lass" shouted a man at me as he slowly edged past me. I'm 60! He called me "lass"!! Now that really made me smile!

The final turn and I knew it was just a couple of miles to go. The wind was basically behind me now, but the fatigue and slower pace had inexorably set in and I found it impossible to do any more than maintain my pace at something that I knew was well within 4 hours, although my mathematical ability had deserted me and I just couldn't work out what time I was heading for – or even what I wanted it to be.

I passed the final water station, then saw Jes up on the cliff. That was enough to give me energy for the last effort along the concrete ledge until finally I rounded the corner and saw the 26 mile marker and the ramp back up to the Middle Walkway and the finish gantry.

I know the plan had been to sprint to the finish, but that wasn't going to happen. Everything hurt and I just kept my legs turning over at the same metronomic pace.

Cow bells rang loudly and shouts of "Come on Sue!" bought an enormous smile to my face as I looked up and saw 3:49 something on the timer. One last push and I ran through the gantry and stopped my watch. I had not only broken my previous best, but had done a sub 3:50 marathon. Happy? ECSTATIC!!

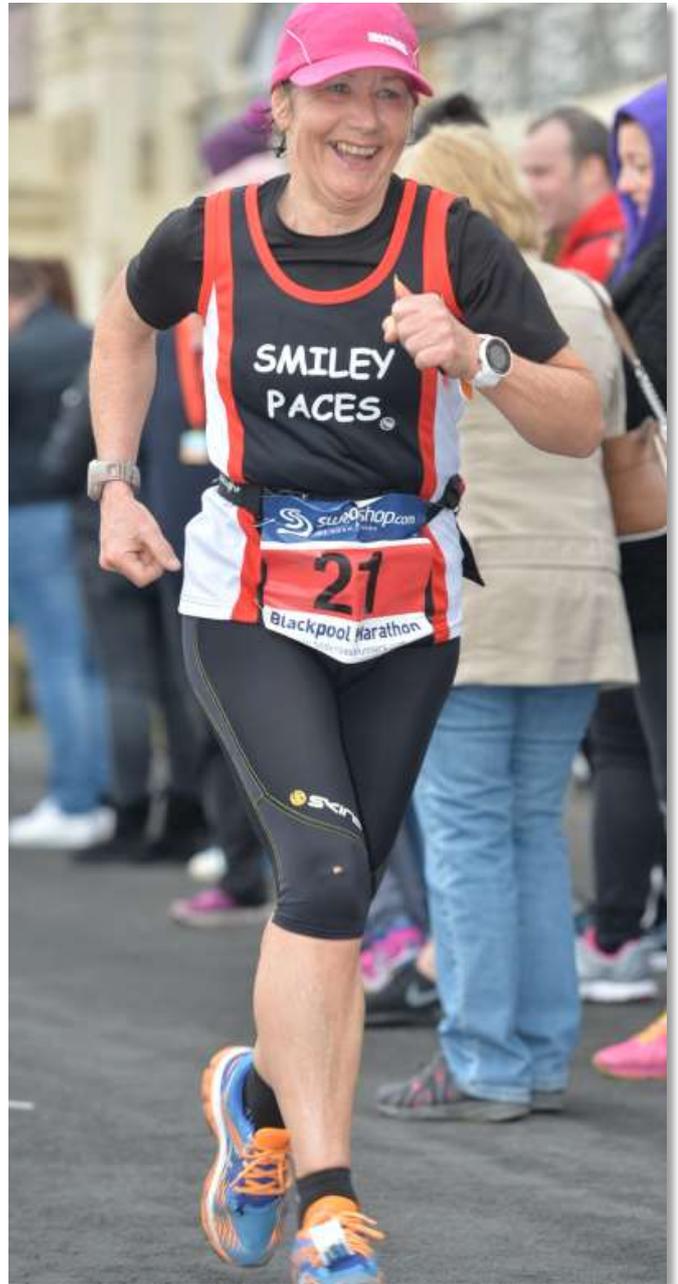
Legs seized instantly and foot screamed in agony. It must have taken 10 minutes to get from the finish line to the end of the funnel! Confirmation of time and the prize for the F60 age group sealed the success for the day.

Vicky earned a massive PB at 3:33:48 and the prize for the V35. Bring on London next year!!

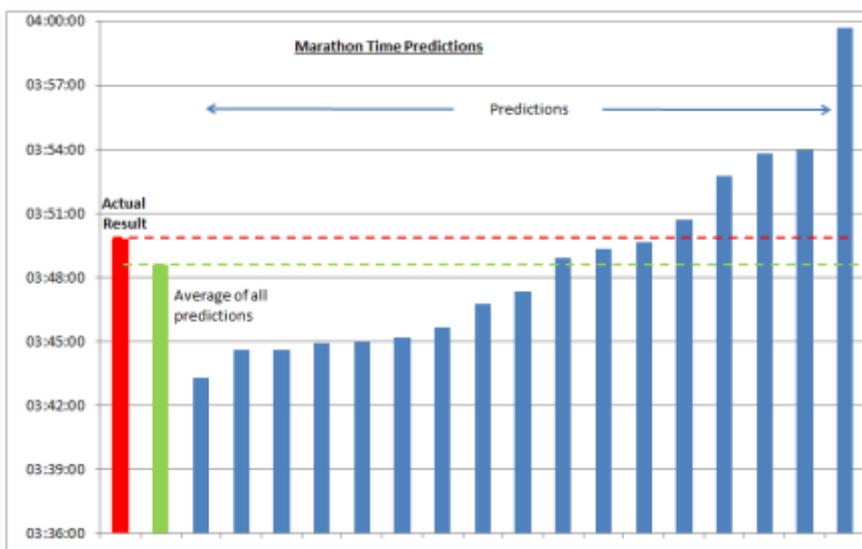


After the race is over.... The Race Analysis

| Split (miles) | Time | net elevation | HR | Cumulative time |
|---------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 08:07 | -7 | 152.5 | 8 mins 6 sec |
| 2 | 08:13 | 22 | 158.25 | 16 mins 20 sec |
| 3 | 08:22 | -35 | 153.25 | 24 mins 42 sec |
| 4 | 08:35 | 8 | 154.25 | 33 mins 16 sec |
| 5 | 08:31 | -5 | 154.25 | 41 mins 47 sec |
| 6 | 08:34 | -4 | 157.25 | 50 mins 21 sec |
| 7 | 08:33 | 24 | 157.75 | 58 mins 55 sec |
| 8 | 08:36 | 31 | 158.25 | 67 mins 30 sec |
| 9 | 08:34 | -19 | 159.25 | 76 mins 5 sec |
| 10 | 08:29 | -13 | 159.25 | 84 mins 34 sec |
| 11 | 08:31 | -8 | 156.25 | 93 mins 5 sec |
| 12 | 08:26 | -3 | 156.75 | 101 mins 31 sec |
| 13 | 08:34 | 5 | 155.5 | 110 mins 5 sec |
| 14 | 08:43 | 34 | 156.5 | 118 mins 48 sec |
| 15 | 08:25 | -30 | 156.5 | 127 mins 13 sec |
| 16 | 08:44 | -6 | 156.5 | 135 mins 57 sec |
| 17 | 08:43 | 3 | 158 | 144 mins 40 sec |
| 18 | 08:54 | -7 | 157.75 | 153 mins 34 sec |
| 19 | 09:03 | -2 | 157.5 | 162 mins 37 sec |
| 20 | 09:16 | 9 | 155.5 | 171 mins 53 sec |
| 21 | 09:27 | 23 | 156.5 | 181 mins 20 sec |
| 22 | 09:18 | -9 | 156 | 190 mins 38 sec |
| 23 | 09:06 | 5 | 155.5 | 199 mins 44 sec |
| 24 | 09:16 | 0 | 155.25 | 209 mins 0 sec |
| 25 | 09:20 | -3 | 155.5 | 218 mins 20 sec |
| 26 | 09:14 | 15 | 156.75 | 227 mins 34 sec |
| 26.2 | 01:24 | -12 | 160 | 236 mins 19 sec |
| Avg | 8:45 | | 156.5 | |



Looking at the splits, I can see that I went off far too fast. The whole of the first lap was completed at a pace faster than the 8:36 I needed for my “A” target. I obviously paid for that in the second lap!



Using several year’s worth of racing heart rate data, I’d worked out that I should run a marathon at an average heart beats per mile of 1350 and an average heart rate of 156. I know it’s meaningless to most people, but how thrilling to see the average of 156.5bpm and the rate per mile of 1369. So close to my calculations!!

Comparing the result with the pre-race predictions, I was just above the average of all of the times predicted

Finally! I earned an age grading of 80.2% - AND am 8th in the UK 2016 F60 rankings (at the moment!).

Race Analysis

