

**02/13/10 - London Ultra 50k**

My expectations were high for what was to be my first race of the year, but so, correspondingly, were my nerves and both contributed to an abnormal level of insomnia the night before the race, as I replayed the positive imagery of crossing the finish line fresh and fast, over in my mind from a million different perspectives.



Start line preparations Nevertheless, as a seasoned racer I more or less fully prepared the night before and although the alarm call at 5:50am was rather unwanted, it was actually a completely unstressed journey all the way to Streatham Common.

Nearly 200 people didn't seem to take up as much space as I expected at the top of the hill, but thankfully I didn't have to wait too long in the cold for Rory Coleman (the race organiser) to give the final brief with Patrick Bauer (of Marathon des Sables fame) from the top of a land rover. The sun even showed itself briefly and spirits were high as we joked about it being just like Morocco!

Then with a countdown from five we were off.

As the front runner (there's always one) disappeared off down the hill, I stayed with the group of a dozen or so at the front although as we chatted away we all realised the 7:00 min/mile pace we had started out at was unlikely to be maintainable over the distance.



Passing the windmill on Wimbledon CommonThe first few turns through the suburban neighbourhood were also tricky to navigate as we all became accustomed to the scale of our maps and the 'gaps' Rory had mentioned at the start. The route also included a lot of road crossings which I anticipated (with my previous 'form') would either kill me or at least slow me down significantly. I needn't have worried about the crossings though as I hardly had to wait at any of them.

Navigation, though, was to become a perpetual problem.

The first 10k was over in a flash and I was so hyped up and focussed on finding my way around the urban landscape between Tooting and Earlsfield that it passed almost before I had realised it, in around 44 minutes. Neither I nor any of the runners around me stopped at the 10k checkpoint as we jumped past Rory taking photos at ground level.



Ring-necked Parakeet The second part of the route was more pleasant, taking in huge swaths of London flora through Wimbledon Park and Common and Richmond park and I was surprised at the number of other runners, cyclists, horse-riders and even hearty groups performing aerobics outside in the cold morning air, until I thought about it and realised it was nearly 10:30am and the second 10k had come and gone in another 49 minutes. I was also surprised to see large numbers of ring-necked parakeets in the woodland trails of Richmond Park, but subsequently discovered they are quite common in the royal parks. I did not even see the second checkpoint as a few runners and myself took a wrong route on our way into Richmond; improvising, I followed my Garmin track parallel to the actual route for a few hundred yards, before picking up the main route again at Richmond Bridge.

The course now twisted and turned as it meandered its way along first the banks of the Thames and then the Grand Union canal and river Brent after a short run through Syon Park which marked the half-way point. Mentally, I could now add the motivation of counting down the kilometres to the end, changing my strategy up to this point which had been incrementing my tally to mark progress from the start. Just after passing under the M4 at Uxbridge, the 30km checkpoint became my first stop for water.



Wembley from Richmond Park The course continued its wayward trail sticking predominantly to the canal through Brent Valley with a hop through Perivale Park before crossing under the Western Avenue (A40) and then a seemingly endless traverse through the maze of suburban housing to the final checkpoint at 40km at the bottom of Sudbury Hill.

The final 10km started off with a 200ft climb, up which I could not believe I was having so much distress after not only the training I had done but also my past exploits which I will not even begin to recount here. Nevertheless I eventually reached the 'summit' and found myself in Harrow on the hill and the world of Harrow public school. What a dichotomy I suddenly saw on this high street, with the fast food, one-stops and phone retailers being replaced with public school sportswear and blazer outfitters. I took a welcome respite as I ran down 'Football Lane' to the Harrow Park sports grounds.

The joy was short lived though as my navigation across empty football pitches morphed once again into the nameless crescents, drives and avenues of suburbia. I had been running on my own for some time, but at this stage I felt more alone than at any time of the race as I ascended the last rise through an unexpected hill cople, before finally turning south towards Wembley Park.



At the Finish line I had first seen the spectacular stadium some time before, but I learned a long time ago that goals you are 'aiming' for while running invariably take significantly longer to reach than you anticipate, mainly because of perspective but also out of sheer blind hope that you are closer than you think.

Nevertheless, as I ran down the last hill and over the final junction I could sense the end was near and the familiar sight of Olympic Way leading up to the main arena almost brought tears to my eyes.

As I peeled off to the main road, Empire Way, I was into the final kilometre and continuing to get strange looks from the spectators walking into whatever event was being held in the stadium and as the finish came into view I heard my family there shouting for me yet again.

Better than any taped finish line, the outstretched arms and screams of my children welcomed me to the end of the race.

You can [see the route here](#).

Overall the race had been a strange one ? a third of the distance of Mont Blanc but completed in less than a tenth of the time. Hardly any hills and definitely no coastline but what scenery there was included a multitude of the parks and canals of London experienced, to my mind, in the best way possible. It was also the first of it's kind and I came away

feeling that I knew the magic of the city a little better than before, that I was starting to understand the variety that our capital has to offer and why so many people have a place in their heart's for London.