

Portland Marathon Race Report | October 1, 2006
by Tony Cava

As many of you probably know (at least those of you who haven't figured out how to politely excuse yourselves from my incessant storytelling), I have spent the past year getting serious about running and running goals. This 2006 Portland Marathon race report is for the rest of you, the ones who got away....

Last November 2005, I found myself with a hamstring injury incurred by 1) running like a weekend warrior and 2) running with, how shall I put it, a little too much of me to love. With my 46th birthday rapidly approaching (December 8 for those of you on the gift registry) and having inherited my mother and father's Sicilian "round gene," I was reaching the point of no return as far as "use it or lose it" goes. I needed to modify my diet and choose a physical activity I loved so that it would be sustainable. Luckily I managed to pull off both feats. I cut out my daily Avenue Bread Hazelnut Cinnamon Roll (I still enjoy a biweekly Veggie Eggenue, great running fuel!), became a grazer/healthy snacker, and rededicated myself to running.

After getting over the hamstring pull, I found a lower mileage training schedule and started working towards my first goal, the Vancouver, BC half-marathon in May 2006. Not knowing what I was doing and never having run that far, I managed an anemic 2:04:00 (9:46-minute miles), running on shin splints (wow, three excuses in one sentence!). After a week off, I set my sights on running a full marathon and began looking for a training program I could manage on the shin splints. In mid-May 2006, I began training for the October 2006 Portland Marathon using Jeff Galloway's run/walk "To Finish" program.

The run/walk idea is fairly simple. By taking walk breaks at regular intervals throughout your run, you give your running muscles — especially the quads, hamstrings, and calves — a rest. And, you recover more quickly for your next run. When you take walk breaks, you lose none of the cardio or fat-burning benefits of continuous running. I've found that I lose about 15 to 20 seconds per mile by taking one-minute walk breaks after each five-minute running segment. I more than make up for the "lost" time by feeling fresh at the end of my training run or race. (As I've learned, negative splits are your friends). For a full explanation, I highly recommend you pick up a copy of Jeff Galloway's book called *Marathon, You Can Do It!* (available at Fairhaven Runners & Walkers!). By following Galloway's 27-week program and taking walk breaks, I got to the marathon start line AND the finish line healthy and happy. Onto the race weekend report!

I had been doing my Sunday long-training runs with my friend and marathon buddy Deb Donovan. We booked a room for two nights (night before and night after) at the Marc Spencer Hotel in Portland's Pearl District, about 14 blocks from the start/finish line. It was very relaxing for us to know that we would 1) wake up in Portland on race morning and 2) not have to hop into a car drenched in sweat right after the race and drive for five hours. After a pre-race week of hydrating and carb-loading, we took off on Saturday morning and arrived in Portland early that afternoon. We checked in, then spent the afternoon hydrating, snacking, going to the Expo, and getting the lay of the land, figuring how long the walk to the start line would take. The rooms at the Marc Spencer have full kitchens and there is a HUGE Whole Foods Market just around the corner, so it's a perfect set-up for doing the home-cooked prerace meal thing. Unfortunately we didn't take advantage of that. We got a bum steer to a not-so-good Italian place and had a mediocre and too-expensive dinner. Next time, we cook in the room!

On race morning, we were up at 5 AM for the 7 AM start. I had brought all my regular Sunday long-run chow with me: granola, Avenue Bread English muffins, OJ, and Peet's coffee, all from home, nothing new on race day. After a shower, stretching and some eats, we were out the door and jogged the mile or so to the start line, arriving warm and ready to go. Just before the gun, I turned around and realized I had lost Deb. I didn't see her again until I passed her at mile 23. Portland is like that. There are a lot of people and you will get separated.

I had originally hoped to qualify for Boston my first time out. At my age I need to hit 3:30:59, or 8:03 minutes per mile to qualify. After averaging 7:20-minute miles in the Fairhaven Runners Waterfront 15K race, I thought 26.2 8:03's would be do-able. But after a couple marathon-pace runs the week before the race, I decided it was better to be conservative and run happy and healthy. I shelved my Boston-qualifying dreams for next year and set out to enjoy my first marathon. I settled for a goal of 3:43, or 8:30 minutes per mile, and I decided to alternate running 8:30 minutes and walking 1 minute. I also committed to walking through every aid station (all 19 of them). I drank at every station, thirsty or not, and ate a GU tube with water every 45 minutes, hungry or not.

As far as strategy goes, I printed up a custom pace band (highly recommended) and wore it on my wrist. A pace band shows the cumulative time at each mile split so when you check your time at each mile marker, you can tell at a glance if you are on pace without having to do any math with your oxygen-deprived brain. This is a good thing if, like me, after mile 18, you are basically thinking with your thighs. The Portland Marathon web site includes a link to a page that allows you to make pace bands with topo-adjusted (or, even-effort) splits. For my race plan (also highly recommended), I started at an 8:40 minute-mile topo-adjusted pace for miles one through 10, took it to 8:30 pace for miles 11-18, then, thanks to the walk breaks, I was able to speed up :05 seconds faster per mile for miles 19 thru 26.2. After a slow start (9:24 mile one), I got out three or four minutes faster than pace after the first 10 miles. But I reeled it in and got right back on my race plan. I just stayed on my race plan and ran based on my watch, my pace band, and how I (honestly) felt.

Since it was my first race I have nothing to compare it to, but the course seemed pretty flat and fast. There are only a few turns and only one moderate hill as you approach the Saint James Bridge. The weather was perfect. Most all of the course is lined with spectators and music and neighborhood block parties. The people of Portland really get into it. Here is a bit of advice if you respond well to positive reinforcement: when you register for Portland, they let you put any name you want on your race bib. I recommend you put your middle name on your bib — especially, if like me, your middle name is Mario. "Mario" will get you shout-outs from ALL the ladies along the course. Trust me: *Go Mario! Here comes Mario! YEAH Mario.* That's what I heard for 26.2 miles. It WILL make you faster.

I was overcome at the finish. I had this HUGE grin on my face and couldn't stop laughing. Deb said I wouldn't stop jumping up and down but I don't remember that. I do remember wanting to weep (from joy) too but I kind of sublimated that. During the walk back to the hotel I thought, "What the heck? How often do you feel like this? Who cares what strangers think?" So there I was walking through downtown Portland, wrapped in aluminum foil, laughing, with a huge grin plastered on my face and tears running down my cheeks. The only thing I can compare it to is that moment of realization when you discover that your one true love loves you back. How the heck often does that happen? Why the heck would I sublimate that? It was great! After our hot baths we waddled across

the street for burgers and beer, then waddled back to the hotel for a champagne toast on the roof garden. A fitting end to the day, and it wasn't even 2 PM yet.

Long story short (well, long, actually): I came in at 3:41:40. That's 8:28 minutes per mile, including 25 one-minute walk breaks, 1:20 faster than my goal pace. Taking walk breaks, I managed negative splits every mile after mile 18, and I ran the second half (1:49:56) faster than the first (1:51:44). My fastest full (and not downhill) mile was mile 26 in 7:54. It took a bit of will power to stay on pace over the last 5K but I passed a LOT of people during that stretch and that kept me motivated. I even sprinted the final 400 meters when some guy passed while flashing me a big grin, like he was gonna take me! "NOOOO!" I shouted in slow motion as he went by. I took it up a notch and blew by him. He's in the background of my finish-line photo, looking none-too-happy, I might add. I think my finishing kick crushed his spirit! (Next time you're in Fairhaven Runners, ask Albert Reimer about this, and he'll tell you what that means). In your FACE, guy who tried to pass me! But that's what's great about marathons: after the winners, here are two guys finishing an hour-and-a-half later, good-naturedly competing against themselves and each other. Now THAT'S a sport!

Looking back on what got me to that finish line, I think, most importantly, the run/walk training got me through injury-free. I really enjoyed that last 10K, and I was already planning my next race while I was still in the finish chute. I've found that run/walk works for both training and race-day. If I can do it (a 46-year-old balding guy with hairy shoulders), anyone can!