

Charlene's Chicago Marathon Race Report

It's **Monday morning, October 8, 2007**, the day after the 30th Anniversary of Chicago Marathon. The front page of the Chicago Tribune reads, "Heat cuts marathon short", "1 dead, dozens sent to hospitals as runners complain of water shortage." I pack the newspaper into my suitcase along with my finisher's metal for completing all 26.2 miles of the Chicago Marathon and head for the airport for my flight home to Nashville.

Friday morning, October 5:

My friend Shari and I flew into Chicago early to get a jump on the packet pick-up and Expo activities. The CTA train ride from the Midway airport took a half hour and dropped us off a block from our hotel....sweet! We stayed at the "Hotel Sax", formerly known as the "House of Blues" Hotel, but the restaurant and nightclub are still next door. The famous "Harry Caray's" restaurant is located on the other side of our hotel. There must be 200 Starbucks in downtown Chicago! I believe no matter where you stand in that city, you can that round green Starbucks logo. <lol>

The Expo was awesome! Packet pick-up was fast and smoothly run. We spent six hours at the Expo, far longer than we expected. We met and spoke with such famous runners as Dick Beardsley, Kathrine Switzer, and Hal Higdon.

Friday night we had dinner at "Ginos East Pizza". Chicago style pizza is very thick and the cheese is on the bottom, not the top. Yum!

Saturday morning, October 6:

We decided on a double decker bus tour to save our legs for the race. It was a 2 and a half hour informative, light-hearted tour of Chicago's greatest landmarks and neighborhoods. We got off at the Sears Tower to check out the view from the top! We had lunch at another popular Italian place, "Giordanos". Shari and I vowed not to eat any place that we could eat at in Nashville...no chains...except Starbucks of course.

Saturday night we had dinner at "Quartinos". Their slogan is, "Where wine is cheaper than water". They had indoor seating and outdoor seating along the sidewalk, so we opted for the outdoor seating. That was so much fun to sit, enjoy our pasta and people watch.

Sunday morning, October 7. Race Day at last!

A not-so-early race start of 8am meant sleeping in till 6am! After all those 4am training runs over the summer, this wake-up call was an easy one. Our hotel was less than a mile walk to the Start line. Dressed, eaten, Glide... in all the places that count, full fuel belts, Endurolytes, gels, hats, sunglasses, we headed out for a nervous walk to Grant Park.

We'd been watching the weather forecast all week, so we knew we would not have the cool morning we'd hoped for and looked forward to all summer. Living in Nashville forced us to train in the heat for much of the summer. We'd start the long runs early to beat the afternoon sun, but sometimes even 4am was hot! We decided Saturday night we would not push for our PR's during this race because of the expected temperatures and warnings from the race officials on the news. We know all about proper hydration, keeping your body temperature down and the warning signs of heat stroke. As runners, we often push ourselves past our "comfort zone" in training to get faster, stronger or to increase our endurance for distance running such as marathons. Race day is the "reward" for months of training and hard work. Runners don't have control over the weather. We do have control over how we train, dress and fuel our bodies. Coming to the start line physically and mentally prepared for any weather condition is a must. Sometimes even in the best conditions, the results don't always turn out the way you planned.

As we stood in the coral waiting for the start of the race, we could hear officials over the PA system telling runners they've added extra water and Gatorade to the course due to the rising temperatures. People are still in line for the port-o-potties, though some don't even bother with the lines and simply find a tree...even a few women! Even though the race started at 8am, we didn't reach the start line till 8:15am, which is not unusual for a marathon of this size. ...also because we're not from Kenya, so we don't start from the front of the pack and finish a little over 2 hours later.

We ran the beginning of the race at a nice pace, we talked for a while, then got separated after the 5k mark. The route started at Grant Park and took runners through Lincoln Park, Wrigleyville, Boystown, Financial District, Greektown, Little Italy, Pilson-Latino community, Chinatown, Bronzeville-"Birthplace of the Blues". Shedd Aquarium, Adler Planetarium and Field Museum are just north of the finish line. I started seeing some runners having difficulty as early as 3 miles into the race. Runners stopping to stretch, catch their breath or whatever. I've seen this before, having run in three other marathons. Even those that train, eat and drink properly before a race can have problems on race day, but there are those who don't put in the long miles, don't eat or hydrate properly and don't dress appropriately either. Every marathon has it's share of runners that shouldn't be out there on the course. Chicago was no exception, but 6 miles into the race, I hadn't seen anything I hadn't seen in other marathon. But then I began to notice the first aid stations looked unusually full. Runners sitting, lying down, throwing up, some with IV's in their arms. I began to hear Ambulances and fire trucks more frequently by the half way point. More and more people were taking more frequent walk breaks, many were sitting on the curb waiting for assistance. By mile 19, the sound of sirens was constant. Every first aid station I passed was over flowing. Gatorade and water stations still had fluids but were noticeably running short. The mile 14 water stop was out of Gatorade and runners were told there would be more at the next stop, a mile and half further down. That's the only time I saw there was no Gatorade. The rest of the route, there was water and Gatorade to be found, although very little, it was where it was suppose to be. My guess is by the time the runners behind me got to those water/Gatorade stations, there was none left. Slower runners in the back of the pack were left without what the faster runners consumed.

Runners typically drink water with their gel, then they may dump the rest on their head to bring down their body temperature. This is normal in a hot race. In the later miles, fire trucks opened up hydrants to cool runners and sprayed fire hoses across the route. It was at mile 19 that I first heard race officials telling runners that the race was called off due to the heat. Most of us thought it was a joke, until I saw police asking runners to begin walking instead of running. Helicopters flew over telling runners over the inadequate PA system that the race was cancelled and pleaded with runners to walk. I heard some officials say that we could board buses that would take us back to the Start/Finish line. No one around me stopped to take them up on their offer.

Many began to walk, but there were plenty that kept on running. As a marathoner, when you get up to those 20+ miles...sometimes it's easier to run than it is to walk. I walked when I heard one officer threaten to pull a runner from the course if he didn't walk, but then I began to run again. I carried my own water bottle from the start and I always topped off when I passed a water station, so I was never out of something to drink. Spectators in the later miles bought bags of ice for the runners and shop owners handed out extra water bottles, home owners sprayed their garden hoses and kids squirted squirt guns. The big ice bags were the best! I'd grab a handful, load up my water bottle and carry a big chunk in my hand, cooling my neck and arms with it. Runners would pass the big chunks of ice to other runners before it melted. Runners are like one big family. We talk to everyone we're running with and even share giant ice chunks.

By mile 23, I'd begun to hear rumors of someone dieing on the course and hundreds more being taken to area hospitals. "This was serious" I thought, but I felt fine. I didn't think it was THAT hot, but the sirens continued and the open fire hydrants were plentiful. It was funny to hear some

spectators encouraging runners to not give up and "keep running, go, go, go" as if they didn't know we were being told to walk.

I rounded the corner onto Roosevelt, the only "hill" on the course. Turning left at the end of Roosevelt, we had .2 miles left. I could see the big "Finish Line" banner across the road. Most runners were running now, because no one wanted the official photographer to take their picture "walking" across the finish line! My official finish time was 5:45:40.

Summary:

Of the 45 thousand people who registered for the 30th running of the Chicago Marathon, 10 thousand never showed up and 11 thousand started but didn't finish the race. Over 300 were treated for heat-related illnesses on the course and were taken to area hospitals. A 35 year old runner died at mile 19 of an undetected pre-existing heart condition. The race was cancelled 3 and a half hours after it started, diverting runners who had not reached the half way point down Adams and Jackson Streets back to the Start/Finish line. Some boarded buses back to the Start line. Runners in the later miles were asked to walk the rest of the way. The temperature was 88 degrees, but the humidity brought the heat index up to 94 degrees. I remember the 2007 Country Music Marathon being hotter. The 2007 Disney Marathon had record setting temperatures as well.

This was my first time visiting Chicago. I loved the architectural and cultural diversity of the city. It was a clean, family friendly city with so much more to see and do than this marathoner could squeeze into one three day week-end. A return trip to Chicago with my family is definitely in order some time next year. This marathon will go down in my running journal as one to remember.

Here's the link to my Chicago Marathon week-end pictures:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/82134922@N00/sets/72157602331609815/>