Post-Marathon With COPD Athlete Russell

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Looking Back at The New York Marathon

It’s been two weeks since the New York marathon and now that I’ve returned home, there’s plenty of time to reflect on what has been achieved, both at a personal level and a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) awareness level.

The Avalanche

After three weeks in the United States, it was good to arrive back home in Australia and not have to be living out of a suitcase all the time. In my final week away I had some down time, which was great as I’d been extremely busy since two weeks before we left for New York.

Finalizing my oxygen unit and the associated medical clearance forms for the airlines was time-consuming. The New York Road Runners, who organize the marathon, had also asked for a medical clearance from my doctor so I could compete in the race.

I had a number of interview requests both in Australia and overseas before leaving for New York, along with having to travel to Melbourne two days before flying out for other TV and newspaper interviews.

When we arrived in New York the interest in what I was trying to achieve continued with more organizations wanting to report on my journey. While raising awareness for COPD and respiratory disease was the main focus of running the marathon, I was unprepared for the level of interest there was before the race.

Acclimatizing

I arrived in the U.S. 10 days before the marathon so I could adjust to the cold climate and have some training runs in my new surroundings. After a couple of days rest from the flight over, my wife and I traveled by bus to Washington, D.C. for the weekend.

It was here I had my first training run, a 3-mile hit out on a brisk Washington morning. It was a great confidence boost as I ran well in the cold conditions and my legs felt fresh and ready for the challenge ahead.

Once back in New York, we spent the next couple of days walking around Manhattan and Brooklyn racking up some 15 miles, which wasn’t too taxing on my legs, but reminded them they had a race coming up. With my coach and the rest of the team arriving on Wednesday night, Thursday was a good opportunity to have our last run before race day.

Coach Doug, his wife Tracey, and I met at the Columbus Circle entrance to Central Park on a cool and sunny morning. Doug wanted me to have an easy 3-mile run, just to make sure my legs felt good and my breathing was under control. I took a little under 40 minutes to complete and all was in order for Sunday’s marathon.

Race Day

The day started at 4 a.m., we had breakfast and made our way to the bus pickup point by 5:15. We were transported to the start line located at the Staten Island end of the Verrazano Bridge, along with over 50,000 other runners.

My wife Leanne and I, along with Doug and Tracey, all had the same starting time of 9:50 a.m. — the first wave of the day.

Next page: Russell recounts the first miles of the marathon

Race Day

At 9:20 we were taken up to the start line with 10,000 other runners in our wave. The atmosphere was amazing, but little did I know this was only a fraction of what lay ahead in the five boroughs.

The sky was littered with helicopters and, after a stirring rendition of the Star Spangled Banner, the race was started with the sound of cannon fire.

Mile 1 to 13

The race started with a steady incline up the Verrazano Bridge. An important part of my race plan was to keep my heart rate under 160 beats per minute, which meant I had to take it slowly up the first incline.

Doug and Tracey had gone ahead of me as planned — their pace dictated that they would finish well before me. Leanne was walking and was planning to leave the course by the 8-mile mark. Due to injury she had been unable to train for the race, but wanted to soak up the atmosphere at the start.

I reached Brooklyn, the second borough, where I found the streets crowded with spectators and musicians in what I could only describe as a carnival atmosphere. It was hard to keep focus on running with all that was going on. Brooklyn certainly put on a party.

By the time I arrived at the 8-mile mark, my race plan was looking a little shaky due to the constant battle of keeping my heart rate down. I knew there were plenty of inclines on the course but had underestimated the length of them.

The other issue affecting me was cigarette smoke drifting across the course from some of the crowd. The combination of these two issues meant I had to start walking occasionally in order to keep my heart rate down.

Having to slow my pace was going to impact my time goal for the race (completing the marathon in under 6 hours) but finishing the race safely was always the main priority. Approaching the halfway point of the race I was still in good shape — my legs felt good and my breathing was under control.

Queens, like Brooklyn, was lined with people and musicians and by now I realized New York was in marathon party mode. I had run races before in which the atmosphere was fantastic, but this race had surpassed anything I had experienced before.

Mile 14 to 26

I left Queens on a high and found myself picking up the pace, but my newfound adrenaline rush was short lived as I struck up the energy to cross Queensborough Bridge. The bridge, which I had to cross to reach Manhattan, was long and uphill.

Soon after I started to cross the bridge my heart rate started to become elevated, which resulted in me having to walk the rest of the way across. Once I reached the other side and started the long stretch down First Avenue, I realized I had to make up some time. The bridge had taken its toll on my time and my target was quickly slipping away.

The run down First Ave. was sensational; this seemed the most populated part of course so far and the crowd was fantastic. People were handing out fruit and lollies to the runners, as well as singing along to the bands playing. I was able to make up some time now as it was a reasonably flat run down to The Bronx.

The Bronx signaled the 20-mile point of the marathon, and while I was excited to reach this point, I had another issue that had surfaced. Pushing the pace up had resulted in me being back on track time wise, but I now was experiencing sharp pain from my right calf muscle.

Next page: Russell decides whether to push through injury or slow down

Mile 14 to 26

I had to stop a couple of times through The Bronx to stretch my calf, which also gave me the opportunity to soak up the atmosphere a little more.

I think it was at around 22 miles I found my calf muscle and heart rate issues were causing me grief and it was time to make a decision: push on to make my time goal and risk injury, or back off the pace, soak up the atmosphere, and finish with a smile on my face.

The crowd made this an easy choice. The next 4 miles was spent running, walking, singing and high-fiving kids that lined the streets with their parents. I arrived at the Columbus Circle entrance to Central Park with mixed emotions.

I was happy to have run a pretty good race, but a little disappointed that it was about to come to an end.

The Finish

Once you reach the 26-mile sign of the course you know the next 200 yards are going to be the most emotional of the race. I had a sign made up to walk across the finish line with: COPD – A Marathon for Life!

This sign is the title of our documentary, but also describes what it’s like to have COPD. I walked slowly down to the finish line enjoying every step I took and lapping up the cheers from the crowds in the grandstand.

6 hours and 5 minutes after starting the New York marathon it was all over and I was satisfied that six months of hard work had paid off. Doug and Tracey had crossed the line more than an hour before me — but where was Leanne?

The Shock

After planning to end her race early due to injuries, I had no idea where Leanne was. I contacted our camera man to find out if he knew where she was, and he told me Leanne was still on the course at the 22-mile marker and was determined to finish.

I sent Leanne a message telling her I would wait for her at the start of the finishing chute. I waited patiently for quite a while, not really sure of when I would see her, then in the distance I spotted a lady limping.

As she came closer I realized it was Leanne. She spotted me behind the fence and came over to me in tears. She was in a lot of pain, but very happy to be in reach of the finish line. We had never finished a race together, so we decided to cross the line together.

I jumped over the barriers, held her hand, and escorted Leanne to the finish line — it was something we'll cherish forever.

The Result

Four started and four finished — we couldn't be happier. Our time in New York had raised plenty of awareness about COPD through articles and interviews before and after the race.

We were able to film some great footage for our documentary, which will also focus on COPD and other respiratory diseases. Now it's time for a well-earned rest, but then I'll be looking for the next race so I can keep showing fellow patients that COPD doesn't have to be a death sentence.