

2011 Gold Coast Marathon Race Report

'In pursuit of Sub 3'

By David Yates

Preface

Rob de Castella once said: "A lot of people don't realize that about 98% of the running I put in is anything but glamorous". Given he's most famous for the Marathon, it seems fitting. To train effectively for the Gold Coast Marathon (GCM) took me the best part of 6 months, with 3 months of solid, marathon focused training. This report starts 3 months out from the race and covers the highs and lows of training as well as the race.

Before I go on however there are some things you should know:

- 1) GCM is billed as the flattest, fastest marathon in Australia, but it can be subject to wind.
- 2) This would be my second "straight" marathon, the first (Melb 2010) being run in 3:18, due to injury, which I felt was a personally disappointing time and not my best effort.
- 3) Going into the GCM I had only one goal: Run a "recreationally fast" time by coming in under 3 hours. Having only one target provided lots of drive, but also created lots of stress, for in my mind anything over 2:59.59 would be a FAIL (I would not recommend others adopt this approach).
- 4) Once I set my mind on doing something, I don't take well to being told it can't be done. In fact it usually just makes me more determined.

Training

3 Months out: My "choose your own adventure" style of training was not yielding results fast enough. I was training too much like a triathlete and not enough like a runner. It was more like "lose your own adventure", so I asked our coach if he thought he could train me up to run under 3 hours. His direct response "No, there isn't time". Noting point 4 above and my single mindedness, I interpreted this as "Of course you can run under 3 hours you just need to find someone who can get you there". In hind sight, his comment probably helped me, as trying to prove I could do it, gave me significant drive.

Enter Bev Thomas: former Long Course Triathlon World Champion and highly regarded coach. Based on my previous run times*, Bev didn't guarantee sub 3 hours, but felt it was possible. However she said it would mean a big shift towards a run based program and that my swimming and cycling would suffer. Since I was consumed with chasing sub 3 hours this was a sacrifice I was prepared to make. *The McMillan marathon predictor based on my 10km PB of 38:00 had me coming in at 3:07. Considering that time was run 10 days after an Ironman I felt it reasonable to assume I could do a little better.

Let the training begin: I stepped up to 5 run sessions per week. In a week I'd run a speed set of ~15km, a tempo session of ~18km. Two short 30 min runs and a long run, the focus of which was twofold –

increased distance and increased time at “faster than marathon pace” towards the end. Whilst some will debate the point, from personal experience the feeling of running “faster than marathon pace” towards the end of a long training run, better stimulates the duress felt towards the end of a real marathon, than “marathon only pace” would. When you think about it, it makes sense, because a long training run is never as long as an actual marathon, therefore never simulates the same feeling of fatigue; so you need to compensate for this with increased speed. Some may wonder why you don’t simply run 42km in training, the reason is the recovery time would then be too great and you wouldn’t be able to resume training soon enough, rendering your training ineffective.

Initially the training left me tired, but after a few weeks my body began to adapt. Proof of how effective Bevs program was, came at the Geelong Half Marathon. I turned up, with no taper, having ridden 80km the day before and proceeded to run down much of the 800 strong field, finishing in a time of 1:22 and placing 23rd outright and running a 2% negative split. Average pace was 3:54/km and I smashed my previous PB by over 5 minutes! The McMillan marathon predictor now showed me finishing the marathon in a best case time of 2:54, though online blogs suggesting adding 7 minutes might yield a worst case time of 3:01.

The Setbacks

Whilst the training made me faster, my own imbalanced body was starting to protest. Because I favored certain muscles, over others, these muscles were working much harder, hence I started to suffer from overuse injuries*. At first it was a tight ITB causing knee pain and then my RH achilles. I had to stop one of my runs due to these issues and felt like such a poser, walking back home with all my 2XU / Half Ironman gear on...

Thankfully a visit to the physio and 2 weeks of reduced running and corrective exercises every night fixed that, but it was still a setback I could have done without.

*Overuse injuries are not necessarily caused by running too far – my heaviest week was only 78km, by contrast many marathoners will run over 100km a week in training and an elite (2:18 PB) runner I spoke to after the event, routinely runs 170km a week and trains twice a day, 6 days a week!

Due to working full time and having a family with two small kids, most of my runs were done around 6am, though the earliest I started was a ludicrous 4:45am! As it got colder and darker (and I became softer), I switched my morning sessions to the treadmill. Running 75+ mins on a treadmill is not fun, but is great for hitting targets – when you set the treadmill to 16km/h you either hold the speed or fall off – great incentive! Unfortunately treadmills don’t provide wind resistance so I’d raise the incline to 1.5 deg to compensate, but that then placed additional load on my achilles, so I compensated for that by lifting my heel with arch supports. Some cringe when they hear this, but it felt like effective training and forced me to hit my run targets without tripping over unseen hazards or freezing my butt off.

Just under 4 weeks before the marathon, I was running along Beach Rd. I had intervals with a target of 4:00 pace, but I felt great, so ripped through them all at 3:40 pace. Having completed my set, I eased off the gas for the easy 4km jog back to work, when I became complacent. I didn’t see the uneven

pavement which my left foot struck, sending me down like sack of potatoes. A shooting pain raged through my left ankle and the words coming out of my mouth, would not have looked out of place, spray painted on the wall of toilet block in Broadmeadows. I felt robbed, 2 minutes before I felt *fast*, now I was hobbling. It turned out I'd sprained my ankle, tearing (but not rupturing) my anterior ligament. It would be 9 days before I could run again (and that was probably too soon) and 2 weeks before I could begin to run properly.

Anguish and Reassurance

2 weeks out from the marathon, I was becoming increasingly nervous and agitated. I'd missed large chunks of training due to the ankle injury I was still carrying. The thought of letting Bev and myself down, whilst at the same time allowing the nay sayers to be right, weighed heavily on my conscious. The fact that I had given myself only one goal – run under 3 hours or FAIL, left me with little option. I simply had to achieve the target; the problem was I didn't think I could.

1 week out, I had a meeting with Bev. She gave me some excellent last minute tips and said I had the fitness to hold a 4:12 avg pace (2:57 overall) and that provided I didn't go out too hard, stayed fuelled / hydrated and ran with a group (to shield me from the wind) I still had a had a chance, though she admitted it could go a few minutes either side of 3 hours. This was what I needed to hear – once again, she gave me a plan and had confidence in me when others, including myself, did not.

Welcome to the Gold Coast where it's sunny and warm

The weekend of the Gold Coast Marathon is more of a running festival; it's not just about the marathon. On Saturday I went to watch some friends race (Kellie Williams partner Dan raced the 10km in 37:23) and by chance I bumped into Anthony "Deeks" de Castella (an excellent running coach and brother of former champion, Rob De Castella). Deeks immediately struck a chord and came across as friendly and extremely knowledgeable. Despite not being "his" athlete, he asked me a few probing questions and offered me some free advice. As per Bevs comments, he said if I wanted to run sub 3 hours, I ought to not to run the whole way with the 3 hour pace group, as fade in the last 5km could mean I wouldn't make it. Being naive, I asked why I couldn't simple out run the pace group in the last few km's and negatively split the marathon – after all, I'd negatively split the Geelong Half Marathon. Deeks was patient and explained that very few people negatively split the marathon – nearly everyone slows down in the last 5km, elites included*. He suggested I try to run the first 36km at a pace that would give me around 5 minutes buffer, so as to allow for fade in the last 5km. As this was roughly in line with Bevs advice I decided to do exactly that. I checked out the weather for race day and realised I'd be running into a slight head wind for the first 16km and the last 6km. This was vital information.

*I checked the splits for the first 3 male runners, all 3 had positive splits and all three faded (if you call 3:13/km fading) in the last 2km, running around 3:04 – 3:07 for the first 40km and "fading" to 3:13 over the last 2km, proving Deeks point.

Race Day

Race day started with light wind and a temp around 14°C. I'd started with a proven plan - 4 x Vitabrits, milk and a banana, 1.5 hour before the start. Voltaren gel was applied to my ankle to counteract the inevitable swelling and I wore my old comfy tri suit complete with 2 pockets to hold 4 gels. I applied liberal amounts of Bodyglide to anything that could chaff – crutch, nipples, lats and toes and donned my visor and black mirrored Oakleys, great for hiding the fear of failure in my eyes. I ditched my heart rate (HR) strap (HR is irrelevant for a marathon, you need only know what pace you can sustain without approaching lactate threshold), meaning less weight and one less thing to chaff. I also set my Garmin 310XT to show only 3 things – pace, avg pace and elapsed time. Provided average pace stayed under 4:15/km, I'd achieve my target.

I walked to the start line with the others and sipped Gatorade. Knowing the toilets would be full and wanting to get rid of unnecessary body weight just before the start, I adopted my proven “Shepparton Tri Penalty Box” method of “waste removal” and then rocked up to the line, just behind the elites, ready to battle the clock.

The race begun and I immediately went into race mode and stuck to the plan. I would use the pace group to block out the wind and then with around 10 – 15km to go, I'd use the slight tail wind to boost my speed, allowing me to outrun the pace group, thus building a buffer, before the inevitable fade set in.

Essentially I did exactly that, running behind the pace group and adjusting my position anytime I felt the wind. Average pace was fast – around 4:07 for the first 30km but perceived effort felt more like 4:30 due to effectively drafting. I knew from my discussions with the pacer beforehand, that he was planning to slow to 4:20 in the last 7km to allow for fatigue, coming home in 2:59.30, but I wanted more buffer than that.

The first 21km were fun – just a controlled effort which gave me time for observation – some of the crazier things I saw included a guy running the marathon without shoes, another with a massive trumpet, one with a sumo nappy and a bunch of completely wasted spectators trying to hand out what appeared to be joints. By and large I stayed out of trouble, my hackles only raised once when a woman from our pace group; hearing myself and others talking about Ironman, stupidly commented “Ironman's for wusses” to which I replied “I take it you've done a few, how many have you done?” Her last word before disappearing off the back of our group was “None”.

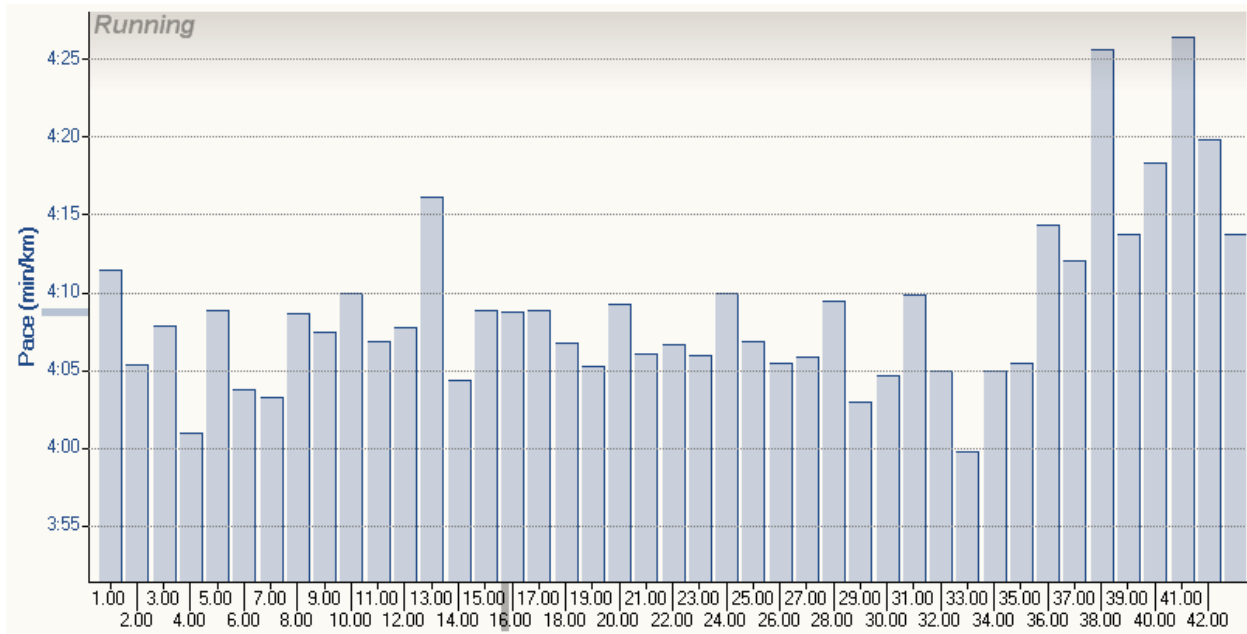
With 14km to go, Steve Moneghetti, the “other” 3 hour pace runner, came up and told our pacer that his current pace was on track for a 2:55 and that he ought to slow down a little. This was my cue to outrun the pace group. Hoping to have a drafting buddy, I asked if anyone wanted to come with me to catch the group ahead, but there were no takers, so I zipped up my tri suit to become as aero as possible and gently urged my body forward, running the next kilometer a little faster at 4:03 in order to bridge the gap, before settling back into a drafting position. So far so good – I'd alternated sports drink and gel + water every 5km, my feet felt fine and my ankle had only given one twinge on a roundabout. I'd also given up coffee the week before to magnify the effect of the caffeinated gels I started taking from the


20km mark – so when I did take them I felt like a race car on avgas. I managed to hold onto my new found, though much less sociable group around the 4:07 pace, but at about the 36km mark the group began to splinter and I began to fade (just like Bev and Deeks had predicted). Aerobically I was fine but my legs began to protest and pace was now slowed by ~9 seconds. I told myself that it was OK, but that it was not an excuse to get even slower. I simply had to endure it and not give in to the comfort of running slowly. This is where Bev’s insistence that I hold 4 min pace at the end of my long runs came in handy – I experienced the same feeling of duress but had just enough mental toughness to limit the damage.

At the 38km mark I took another gel + water as per the plan. Being only 4km from the finish it was tempting to not bother, but I told myself this was not the time for second thoughts and to simply execute the plan. After the gel, pace hovered around a more acceptable 4:17 for the next 2km and I was still 400m ahead of the 3 minute pace group. For some reason I must have lost focus in the 41st km, because pace slipped to an all-time worst of 4:26, until I gave myself a much needed kick in the butt, and once again returned to a 4:20 pace, with a 4:14 pace over the last 500m.

With 270m to go I tried to pick things up, but lacked the energy to even do up my tri suit, much less run any faster, but it didn’t matter. Ultimately the race plan paid off – I ran a 2:56.17, comfortably under 3 hours and placed 111th outright from 4549 finishers or top 3% overall (top 7% by AG). I also managed to not let myself or Bev down in the process.

My 1km splits and net race results are shown on the following pages.



NET TIME	NET PLACE
 <p>AVERAGE PACE: 04:10</p>	111 of 4,549 TOTAL finishers.
	105 of 3,044 M finishers.
	29 of 477 M30-34 finishers.

SPLIT TIMES								
split point	split time	s/rank	race time	r/rank	activity	distance	pace	speed
Five Kilometre Splits								
5KM	00:20:42	263	00:20:48	277	RUN	5.00	04:08	14.49
10KM	00:20:44	219	00:41:33	257	RUN	5.00	04:08	14.46
15KM	00:20:55	231	01:02:29	247	RUN	5.00	04:11	14.33
20KM	00:20:49	201	01:23:18	231	RUN	5.00	04:09	14.40
25KM	00:20:45	152	01:44:04	195	RUN	5.00	04:09	14.46
30KM	00:20:45	106	02:04:49	161	RUN	5.00	04:09	14.46
35KM	00:20:30	64	02:25:19	128	RUN	5.00	04:06	14.63
40KM	00:21:30	81	02:46:50	116	RUN	5.00	04:18	13.95
Finish	00:09:33	107	02:56:23	111	RUN	2.20	04:20	13.82
Half Way Splits								
Half Way	01:27:43	155	01:27:49	235	RUN	21.10	04:09	14.43
Finish	01:28:34	107	02:56:23	111	RUN	21.10	04:11	14.29

Answering the critics

You could argue I only broke 3 hours because I had a great coach and I drafted like crazy and let others do most of the work. Or perhaps you could argue all I really did was execute a training and race plan, that more experienced people told me should work. In either case, since neither is outside the rules I feel no guilt.

Thanks

Many thanks go to Bev Thomas, without her coaching and belief in me, I would never had made it. Thanks also go to Deeks for his fine tuning of my race plan and to Michael Pratt for his suggestions and for giving me the extra drive to break 3 hours. Lastly, thanks to my family for supporting my endeavors.

I will leave you with one final quote from Doug Larson: "Some of the world's greatest feats were accomplished by people not smart enough to know they were impossible".