

## Pace without a Trace

3:19:45/DNS

I appreciate those that share a few hours of their day to help out at races. The volunteers that assist with organizing events, handing out packets at Expos, sloshing Gatorade and water at aid stations and biking along the route to lend rolling support. Without the generous giving of time, there would be no water stops, no smiles, no marathon.

It was time to give back, to be a helper. So I forsook my chance for a PR in Chicago and signed up to lead the three hour, twenty minute pace group at the Des Moines marathon. I live in Des Moines, I understand how to dance with the marathon, so why not give back and help others reach their goals and put feet to their dreams? I'd lead them from Des Moines to Boston in a little over three hours.

Race day: "Hey Eric, where's your chip?" "Oh no! Fiddlesticks...I forgot to put it on my shoe last night. What an idiot! I guess it'll be a DNS on the results for me today." I would pace this puppy without a trace. Although it didn't really matter. This race belonged not to me, but to those I'd cheerfully shepherd through the next 26.2 miles. This would be my slowest marathon, but perhaps the one with the most purpose.

Bang, we're off. Our pack of ten ease off due-east into the chilly morning towards the gleaming gold bubble of the State Capital, biting off the pavement in 7:33 chunks. The first mile can be the most difficult, because you have to strongly fight the urge to surge the pace. Electricity zapped from brain to thighs and tried to tickle the pace a little quicker. But it was important to lead off slowly and set the example early on. I'd lectured the group about not being stupid the first two miles, we'd be smart and systematically eat up the field in time (which we did).

In the early miles, the spectators were either shy, afraid to cheer, tranquilized with darts or fast asleep. We'd run by a group of 20 watchers, and you would hear only the sound of chirping crickets and crying babies. I shook my 3:20 pace sign at them like a magic princess wand and shouted, "Yeah, this is the 3:20 group comin' through, let's hear it!" More crickets. And more crying babies. Oh well, I guess any crowd seems lax after running Chicago.

Hearty crowd support lifted our spirits at mile five at the corner of John Lynde and 42<sup>nd</sup>. Those in my pace group were quiet, so I yakked across the silence. Pointed out philanthropist John Pappajohn's home, admired the mustached musician that was blubbering out floppy notes from his tarnished tuba around Foster Drive, mentioned the weddings that are framed in the rose garden at the Salisbury House as we swished past. I think the group yearned for me to shut my hole so they could concentrate on staying relaxed through the hills.



Our group swelled as we picked up more twitching road kill along the way. We had nearly 20 at one point. Above, the gal in purple and white hat, Kelly, is a police officer from Quincy, Illinois. She looked really strong through 17 miles but struggled in the waning 10K and finished in 3:33. Her husband, Doug, started with us, but we lost him at a bathroom stop. He mostly caught up later and finished in 3:22. The man to the right of her, in the white singlet and black gloves is Brian, he was chatty and having fun. He somehow tracked down my e-mail address and thanked me a few days later for helping him through it. He'd have an engine failure the final push with his legs turning to mush and a hard bonk leading to a 3:33 finish. And the man way in the back, Mark from Galena, you can only see his right arm and black singlet would soon emerge as the strongest in the herd.

Mile 12, we darted around the smurf-blue rubber of Drake stadium. Our likeness was to be blaring across the Jumbotron, but it had a Bulldog screensaver on instead. I told the group somebody needed to move the mouse to wake up the screen. No response, only crickets.



“Looking good, 3:20 group, we are right on pace! Nice job, shake your arms out and stay relaxed. Remember to take in a GU every six miles or 45 minutes.” As we flew south on Polk, I handed the pace sign to Brian, barked that he was not to adjust the pace one iota, then slowed to check on those in the back. I did my best to help four of them that were hanging on by a thread. They appreciated the gesture, and it seemed to work, as they tightened back into the group and stayed with us awhile longer. One of them, a 49 year old from Urbandale, would go on with me to the end and finish a few seconds ahead. I wonder if he would have held on if I’d not nudged him back into the fold?

We glided past the Art Center and began the descent along the old Science Center, next to the central pool, down the wooded Bill Riley trail and under the rusty Water Works railroad bridge. Everything was going according to plan, we were comfortably under our 3:20 goal time. We ran up the hump of the splintered-wood bridge over the Raccoon River to the start of the Works Park loop. “Our pacer’s a robot!” someone yelled from behind. Not sure if that was a compliment or they were making fun of me.

To the Big Mother Loop in Water Works we went as a dozen runners leaned into the wind on the back 40. “Let’s stay steady through this section, no faster or slower than what we are doing now. If you feel the bear chasing you, take another GU and keep up.” This was the roughest section for us. I could tell many were getting tired and wanted to call it quits. I slowed down ever so slightly to try and keep us together, but alas, attrition would shrink us down to seven or eight. “Stay with me, and I guarantee you’ll finish under 3:20. The worst is over, I promise!”

The walkers were many as we headed around Gray’s Lake. They were staggering along five and six wide, nearly blocking the trail for the marathon contingent pushing through. I was trying my best to be polite and asked them to please move to the right. A man in my group was not amused with the slow pokes, he’d had enough. He ran right up next to a line of walkers, arms outstretched and nudged them over with his sweaty wet shoulder while shouting, “MOVE OVER, GET OUT OF THE WAAAYYY!!!”. I laughed on the inside, as he did what everybody in our pack secretly wanted to do.

Our contingent compressed down to six as we ran along MLK the final mile. I told the gentlemen to charge ahead and spank me if they had something left in reserve. I’d keep the cruise control locked at 7:35 regardless of whether they wanted to shut me down. They all happily obliged and dropped me in short order, which made me smile. I was proud of them.

In the finishing area, Mark from Galena limped over, put his arm around and asked his wife to take our photo. He’d finished around 3:19 was very appreciative. I told him he did it, it was all him. I simply slowed him down the first 25 miles. He was excited to be able to toe the line at Hopkinton.

My friend, Julie, later whispered, “*Eric, I saw you hugging another man at the finish line today. I’m tellin’ your running buddies at work.*” No matter, for I wasn’t there. After all, I posted a DNS, paced without a trace.

