

Beach to Bay Relay Marathon Saturday, May 15th, 2010

The big story, of course, was the weather. The rain was supposed to be all done by Friday night, with no chance on Saturday. Saturday morning I am up at dark-thirty as usual, and turn the TV on to the Weather Channel. There's the radar of south Texas, but what's this? There's this big, angry red and yellow blob moving across the state headed right at Corpus Christi. A few quick calculations of the storm's movement vs. time confirmed my suspicion: this thing was going to hit right as I started my leg in the race.

When the runners on the first and second legs left to go to the starting line, the sky was already dark and threatening. The first leg runners (Laura Mason and Mike Scholz) had the leg that is an out-and-back on the beach. The winds were getting strong at this point; and Laura reported that, in addition to having a strong headwind for part of her leg, the tides had pushed big piles of seaweed high on the beach, which left the runners an unusually narrow corridor of sand on which to find decent footing.

The second-leg runners (Elma Minor and Dana Power) had to deal with a strong headwind for their entire leg, as they were running a south-to-north route; and with the storm to the northwest, its strong downdraft created a very difficult challenge for them. As they reached the end of their leg, the raindrops began, which - being propelled by a 35 mph wind - did not feel very nice.

I was running the third leg, along with Paul Power. This is the causeway leg, almost completely over water and - with the causeway bridge - the only hill in the entire course. I was dismayed to see Dana, the second leg from the other team (Sandy Soles), arrive at the transition before Elma, the second leg from my team (Fiesta on Foot). This, of course, was because I wanted my team to beat the other team. I thought, well, heck; now I'm going to have to try and catch up to Paul. Finally Elma arrived and handed me the baton; as I exited the transition area to begin my leg, there was Dana at the end of the chute, holding up the baton, looking for Paul! At first I charitably thought, how unfortunate. But in the next instant a villainous cackle bubbled up inside of me. Yessss! We're ahead!

The aforementioned villainous cackle was cut short quickly, as I had barely left the transition area when the bottom dropped out. I mean, it rained hard. In addition, a vigorous display of lightning crackled across the skies. As I ascended to the top of the causeway bridge, I was intensely aware that - at 6 foot 8 - I was probably the highest object in the area.

Fortunately, as the storm was actually moving around us to our right, the storm's downdraft winds became a crosswind for me; then later in my leg, actually somewhat of a tailwind. But there was no negotiating with that rain. It continued to pour down, and even the holes in the curb on the causeway could not let the water off of the road fast enough. We were splashing, the faster runners making rooster tails.

But despite the lousy weather, I actually had a good run. Paul had not caught me yet, and I knew we were ahead of the Sandy Soles. As I approached the transition at the end of my leg, the rain began to let up a little. By the time I handed off to my fourth-leg teammate, Liesela Austin, the rain had almost completely stopped. Although I was soaked, I had to stand out in the slop long enough to see how much of a lead we had on the Sandy Soles. About ten minutes or so later, their fourth-leg runner, Margaret Collins, took the baton from Paul; and I knew how big our lead was.

From there, it was all downhill, figuratively speaking. Although there were still occasional light showers, the wind had dropped off and the skies were gradually clearing. By the time the fifth-leg runners (Charlene Martinez and Kathleen Seal) and the sixth-leg runners (Elizabeth Wills and Ron Seal) were finished, and we were all gathering at the finish area for the post-race celebration, the skies had cleared to blue and it was a lovely day. Someone just waking up would never imagine what conditions we had run through just a couple of hours earlier.

A sub-plot has to do with the fact that - because this was the 35th anniversary of Beach to Bay - they had increased the cap on the number of teams entering the race to 2,400. We have often talked about the difficulty in planning the transportation and pick-up of 6 runners to 6 different locations, multiplied by 1,000 or even 1,500 teams, and the traffic problems created by that many runners. Somewhere between, say, 1,600 teams and this year's 2,400, the entire exercise reaches critical mass; and we see that the city's infrastructure can no longer handle that many vehicles trying to get to the same place.

Ordinarily, it is no problem for the first leg runner to get into a vehicle when they are finished and escape North Padre Island over the Causeway before traffic over the bridge gets too heavy. But this year, Laura Mason did just that; the traffic was so bad that she was stuck in Elma's car for 4 1/2 hours, just trying to get over the Causeway and get to the finish area near downtown. The area around Texas A&M - Corpus Christi, from which the shuttle buses operate that transport the fourth-leg runners, was a quagmire. You could innocently drive your vehicle into that area, looking to pick up a teammate, and not emerge for hours. We can speak from experience on this.

All in all, we had a great time and a good race. Fiesta on Foot did indeed best the Sandy Soles.

David Alexander