

BQ-ing at the Tunnel Light Marathon By Jerry L. Canterbury



In high school, I was picked last for dodgeball. Perhaps not absolutely last. With age the memory gets fuzzy. Maybe there were one or two other students left to choose after me. But if I wasn't last, it was a near thing. Back then, I never thought I'd ever be fit enough to qualify for an internationally recognized athletic event. Yet, this former high school nerd just qualified to run the Boston Marathon next April.

When I moved from Ohio to North Carolina about ten years ago, I was an overweight desk jockey. After making a geographic change, I decided to make some personal changes as well, changing my diet, losing weight, and improving my fitness. Initially my running mixed in a fair amount of walk breaks. Eventually I could run

further. A few years later I found that I was also running faster.

In early 2015 I decided that running Boston would be my next goal. I announced my goal to the world to keep myself accountable, and even invented a hashtag: #JerryMustBQ. I engaged Jackie Miller of BritFit as my coach and we got to work, knowing that I would need to take at least 30 minutes off my then-best marathon time of 4:08:50.

I didn't expect it to take 3½ years to achieve my goal. I don't have physical gifts others do, and I'm not that guy who qualifies in his very first marathon. Speed improvement took longer than I thought. I also had injuries along the way, including a stress fracture, hip flexor strains, and shin splints.

But through each setback, I persevered.

Over the years, my marathon times decreased. I broke four hours for the first time at the 2016 New Jersey Marathon. At 2017 Peak to Creek Marathon I achieved 3:41:23 on a downhill course, and at flat 2018 Myrtle Beach Marathon I clocked 3:44:26 on a very windy day. My times were getting very close. The training was working. I was immensely proud of each one of those efforts.

Each time I came up short, I learned something. I learned that I was bonking in the last few miles. I also found that my mental game needed to bit a little stronger to get through the final miles when I was tired and hurting. I needed to make some further changes to break 3:40, the qualifying

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time for my age group. But once these problems were identified, I just saw these as problems to be solved.

With each problem identified, I researched how to solve it. For example, I read that losing five pounds could save you 4½ minutes on a marathon, so I lost an additional 15 pounds over 3½ years. I read Matt Fitzgerald's *The New Rules of Marathon and Half-Marathon Nutrition: A Cutting-Edge Plan to Fuel Your Body Beyond "the Wall"* to learn that I should consume gels every 20 minutes during the marathon to ensure I had sufficient nutrition throughout the race and I wouldn't bonk. Fitzgerald also suggested that adding beet juice to my diet could boost performance, so I added that. Finally, Fitzgerald suggested taking caffeine gels during the race after caffeine fasting during the week before the race. I



tested all these suggestions during training so I wouldn't be experimenting with them on race day.

Now I just needed to choose a fall race. I know I wanted either a very flat course or one with a gradual downhill. I also needed a race with a starting temperature around 50 degrees and low humidity. I settled on the Tunnel Light Marathon <www.tunnelmarathon.com> on September 16, 2018 in North Bend, Washington, setting of the fictional *Twin Peaks* TV show. This gradual downhill course starts at the top of the Cascades range then gradually declines 2000 feet along a rail-trail similar to the American Tobacco Trail. Also like the ATT, the course is long and straight with only gentle curves except for one big turn near mile 20. The first two miles are through a converted railroad tunnel, giving the race its name, and also requiring a headlamp or other light for participants. Gaiters are also recommended because of the crushed gravel surface. Five versions of this race from two different race directors are run during the year, allowing about 500 participants for each race to choose the time of year that works best for them. Marathons on this course are consistently rated among the fastest in the country.

With my race chosen and travel plans booked, all that remained was to finish training. Coach Jackie set me up with a plan that included many tough speed intervals along with lots of long easy runs to build mileage. Training also included lower body strength work. Cycling was included for cross-training until the last couple months, when run mileage increased up to 49 miles per week.

Speed intervals in a North Carolina summer, or any running really, can be a challenge. Sunrise temperatures in the 70's plus humidity of 95% or more are not

uncommon. Although some suggest backing off a bit in such conditions, I pushed to hit interval pace targets to the greatest degree possible, and often did. When I couldn't, I focused on keeping my heart rate in zones 4 and 5 instead. Knowing that my training conditions were more challenging than expected race day conditions, I adopted a mantra: "Train in misery, race in comfort." Every training run resulted in me standing in my garage post-run as I stripped off my completely drenched clothing.

Finally, I needed to choose my goal time for the race. I had to beat the qualifying time for my age group – 3:40. But because more people ran fast enough to qualify than there are available spots, the Boston organizers take the fastest people in each age group to register. I guessed I would need to run a 3:35 to register for the race so set that as my goal – an 8:12 pace for 26.2 miles.

When I first arrived in Washington State a week in advance, the forecast for race day looked great, with sunshine and cool temperatures. As the week wore on however, the forecast deteriorated until it was cold temperatures in the 40s and steady rain. At first, I freaked a little, then I told myself, "You've been wet during every humid run all summer; you won't be any wetter on race day." That mental trick helped tremendously.

The Tunnel Light Marathon provides pacers. However, the pace groups near me were for 3:30 (faster than I felt I could run) and 3:40 (too slow to register for Boston). I attempted to create my own pace group by making a sign that said "My goal is 3:35. If that's your goal too, let's run together." I planned to have it at the race start.

On race morning, we drove half an hour in the dark and rain from our bed-and-breakfast up the mountain to the race start.

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The rain stopped when we arrived, and the temperature was a chilly 48 degrees. After a short warmup run I held my 3:35 sign and talked to a number of individuals about my race plans, but had no takers. About five minutes before race start, a light drizzle started to a collective groan from the racers. I took my place between the 3:30 and 3:40 pace groups and crossed the start line about 20 seconds after the gun sounded.

After about ¼ mile I entered the tunnel. With so many runners carrying lights it was not difficult to see, but it was a bit crowded. About halfway through I heard someone fall behind me. Later I learned it was the 3:40 pacer, and some others had fallen over him as well! However, he recovered and I spoke to him at the finish line.

Within the tunnel, my Garmin GPS didn't work. There were lights on the ground by the mile markers so I checked my pace against my watch and against my pace band which showed when I should reach each split. Once I exited the tunnel, the Garmin resynced to the satellites and matched the course mile markers fairly well after that. There was a clothing drop station and an aid station at the tunnel exit. I left my headlamp there, as well as my sweatshirt since I'd warmed up quite a bit in the tunnel. I accidentally splashed water on my knit gloves at the aid station, making them ineffective for warmth, so I stripped those off and dropped them as well. To the race organizers' credit, everything I dropped there was waiting for me at the finish line.

A mile or so after the tunnel, a young woman came up next to me. "Are you the 3:35 guy? Can I run with you?" My sign had worked after all! Amy (Bib 352 in photo) and I had the same 3:40 qualifying time so it was a perfect pairing. Amy's Garmin had malfunctioned somehow so I called out our paces and splits along the way to keep us both on track. This also helped me as I tend to go out too fast. Each time I checked our progress I turned to tell Amy we needed to ease up. Eventually we did slow, although it might have been more fatigue than anything else.

The miles clicked by. Although the day was overcast, the scenery and greenery were spectacular. Amy and I agreed that the gradual descent made the day feel like an easy training run. My nutrition and hydration were on target. It drizzled off and on during the race so I was completely wet and spent a lot of time dodging puddles, but there was never a heavy downpour. Amy and I were tracking about a minute ahead of our goal time.

About mile 18 is when I finally started to feel like I was running a marathon. As I tired, I began to lean rightward while running.

This tilt is just an alignment problem caused by an old injury, but the further I went, the worse it got. I had to physically pull myself leftward at the times to avoid running off the right side of the trail, which given that the right side occasionally involved a steep drop-off might have been disastrous.

After mile 20, I was concerned about hitting the wall and bonking, but that never happened. At mile 23, I focused on my mental game, telling myself to just keep pushing at 8:12 and I had this. At mile 24, Amy started to pull away – she was a bit stronger that day. After she opened a little gap, I could see her hesitate a bit, perhaps wondering if she should wait for me. I yelled, "Go Amy, go!" and she took off, disappearing around the bend ahead.

At mile 25, my Garmin and my pace band both told me I could meet my goal if I just didn't let up. But I also knew that the last mile of the course flattened out, so I would need to push harder. My rightward tilt became very pronounced but I kept moving forward. With 0.2 miles to go, I didn't have enough left in me to sprint, but I pushed as hard as possible until I heard my name called and passed under the finishing arch. My time was 3:33:37 – 1:23 ahead of my goal time, and more importantly, 6:23 ahead of the 3:40 qualifying time.

Amy had waited for me after finishing about one minute ahead of me. We gave each other a big hug as we had both qualified for the Boston Marathon for the first time. I began sobbing with joy and relief as medical staff came over to keep me from collapsing, and sat me down in a chair with a cup of Gatorade to recover.

The next morning, I signed up for the Boston Marathon. While I had beat the qualifying time by 6:23, I wouldn't know the cutoff until a week after registration closed. Ten days later, the cutoff was announced as 4:52. My entry was accepted. I am running the Boston Marathon next April. 🏃

