

Jungfrau Marathon 2015



On Saturday 12th September I set off from Interlaken in the Swiss Alps with 4499 others, heading for the Jungfrau Mountain, which was a little over 26 miles in distance and 5000 feet of ascent away.

It all started a couple of years ago when we had a very snowy holiday - despite it being June - in the area, and I got to hear about the Jungfrau Marathon. So I got up at 7am one Saturday morning in February to book my place immediately entries opened. Five minutes and £86 later I was back in bed, all booked with the usual Swiss efficiency.

Entering so far ahead and knowing that there were strict time cut offs - you have to finish within 6 and a half hours, with some intermediate cut offs as well - meant that I decided that my long term training plan was to complete a long event every month, as I wanted to finish the race. Reading some websites it was mentioned that you should add 2 hours to your normal (flat) marathon time, so I was not totally confident of making it within the time.

So the Cleveland Survival, 3 Peaks, Lakeland Trails Coniston Half Marathon, Lyke Walk Race and the Ochil's 2000's were completed. Also, a two week holiday in the Rockies in May where we did much more running and walking than expected all at 5000 / 6000 feet attitude, with lots of snow - definitely helped when I came back down to sea level.

During the summer, I realised that the Italian Grand Prix was the weekend before the Jungfrau Marathon. So after checking out logistics / tickets / accommodation etc. we went to Monza for the Grand Prix - amazing circuit and atmosphere, dull race - and then moved onto Switzerland for the rest of the week.

We had a couple of days walking and the others sightseeing in Lucerne and Thun before checking into our hotel in Interlaken on the Friday evening. The Marathon is a big event locally with lots of kids and para races on the Friday evening, pasta party, free concerts, flag waving displays, tv coverage etc. etc.

By the time the race started at 9am the sun was out and it looked like it was going to be a long, hot day - forecast was for 24 degrees by the afternoon. I decided to start near the back as I did not want to go to fast early on and did not really know what pace to keep. The first few miles are a loop of the town then out through the suburbs before heading for up the main valley.

The first half of the race to Lauterbrunnen is for the road runners, ascending only just over 200 metres in 25km and being on tarmac and good footpaths. I ran just ahead of the 6 hour pace runner for a while then eased away from him, keeping a steady 6 minute / km pace. Due to the valley being narrow and steep sided we were for the most part in the shade which was good. Also had the novelty of being passed by an ageing biker on a Harley Davidson who had Frank Sinatra songs blasting out from a speaker on the back of his bike!

I left Lauterbrunnen (25km) in 2273rd place and feeling fine and surprised myself by passing the 5 hours 30 mins pace runner. Then the really fun started with 400metres of non-stop climb in 2km, zigzagging its way straight up to the ski resort of Wengen - almost everyone was walking immediately. The marker posts changed from being every 1km to every 250m. It was hard but I was able to run it all and passed loads of people. There were thousands of spectators in Wengen and a great atmosphere.

There were loads of feeding stations on the route with water, energy drinks (which tasted revolting), bouillon? energy gels and food. Also numerous massage stations and first aid points - all were busy.

After Wengen there was a long relentless climb (part walk and part run), initially in the open - it was getting hot now - but then was in the woods for a long stretch, which was much cooler and less steep. Up ahead I saw a running vest I thought I recognised. I turned round just as I passed the person to see it was a Loftus and Whitby AC vest with Alan Smitheman from Skelton inside it. We had a chat then I ran off as he was tiring.

The last 5km were tough, but with amazing scenery- out of the woods and onto the open hills and glacial remains, with a couple of km of complete single file uphill slog which seemed never ending. To take your mind off the effort, at various points there was an Alpine Horn orchestra, a Swiss man playing the bagpipes (a dudelsack in German!!), cow bell bands and the film helicopter swooping over to capture our suffering. I passed one guy completely collapsed on the side of the path and not moving - but he said he was ok!

Suddenly we turned a corner around a ridge line and we could see the finish for the first time. This is a 1km run downhill, so all tiredness was forgotten and a full speed all out blast to the finish.

I was exceptionally pleased to finish in 5 hours 15 mins 46 seconds, which was 1404th place. So I must have passed nearly 900 people in the second half of the race. I was 955th fastest time for the second half of the race, so all those Tuesday night runs obviously made a difference. The winner got round in 3 hrs 2 mins.

Immediately at the finish there was a free bar offering local beer. I queued, got my pint, took one sip and had to throw the rest away as I just could not drink it. I met another English competitor who said he wanted back three times. I did however keep my 2kg bar of Lindt chocolate.

The race actually finishes close to Kleine Scheidegg railway station, so after collecting my bag and meeting my wife - who arrived after I had finished - we got the cog railway back to Interlaken. Unfortunately I started getting bad stomach cramps several times on the train. Whilst waiting at a station to change trains I suddenly threw up 4 times in short succession after which I immediately felt fine and had an ice cream 20 mins later!!

So all in all an amazing event in a great country, a bit more road running than ideal, but exceptionally well organised with stunning scenery at the top and free beer and chocolate.

David