

Chi-ca-go -My Story

The Ballot

To get in and run one of the Six Major Marathons (Tokyo, Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago and New York) one goes through a process known as balloting. This is where you make an online application and wait for confirmation from the organisers. Save for Boston, where they accept time qualifications based on age, all the other five are thrown to chance. Meaning, it is not a guaranteed entry. It is known that London and Tokyo have the least chances of getting in while Chicago and Berlin have the highest chances.

I got into the Chicago Marathon through a very interesting way. The ballot for Berlin Marathon is open at the same time as that of the Chicago Marathon. The two marathons are held in September and October respectively. In 2017, I started by balloting with the Berlin Marathon since the ballot opens before Chicago. I balloted for the Berlin Marathon with 100% confidence I would be called. This is because, the previous year my friend Joshua Cheruiyot a steely runner had successfully balloted. I therefore did not want to attempt balloting the Chicago Marathon when it opened a few days later, lest I get called. This would mean running both marathons back to back, if the chances of both go through. But as the days passed by and the closure date of Chicago ballot was almost up, I got a mixed feeling that I should just try in case I missed getting called for Berlin. To reassure I was about to do the right thing, I called Joshua for advice. Joshua immediately convinced me to ballot for Chicago. Joshua is the type of guy who will run a marathon today, have an ice bath and walk into an Ultra Marathon tomorrow. That's what he did after running Chicago Marathon, and a week later he was running 100 Miles. Kudos to that, however I will stick to my lane. I was therefore sceptical to listen to his advice. Nonetheless, I balloted for Chicago and crossed my fingers -I would not be called for both. Long story short, I failed to get into Berlin and I was successful to get through Chicago. Thanks Joshua! But next time I will not listen to you -tongue in cheek.

The Wait

On the 16th of November 2017 (which coincides to be my birthday), I received the good news from the Chicago marathon organisers. Coincidentally, other running buddies also received the same good news and we quickly created a WhatsApp group. By the end of that week we had about 16 runners who had confirmed entry. The number later grew to 25. A record number of recreational runners from Kenya participating in the Major's.

The Chicago marathon is held in October. We were in November. What would I do for eleven months? I had planned I would prepare a training program which would take 5 months, I therefore had six months to look for something to do. Six months is a long time, for an ardent marathoner. My mind shifted from running the Kigali Peace Marathon to the Kilimanjaro Marathon. I settled for Kilimanjaro Marathon for no good reason really. Having run this race previously, I was only doing it for fitness purposes. I got in and ran a time of 2:56:33 (Note the 33 secs -I'll explain later). I was delighted by this performance. Notwithstanding, two weeks prior to this I had just completed my first ever competitive bike challenge which I came in 11th out of 50. Call it "foolish courage" a phrase commonly used by my fellow villager Mr. Ngatia.

The Training

Three months down, two to go before the Chicago training. A one-month break was deserved. The following month was spent at the gym. Some muscle strengthening would come in handy before I begin running. My running program for the Chicago Marathon began on 21st May 2018 (exactly 20 weeks before race day). The first four weeks of training encompassed endurance runs. Here, I gradually increased my mileage from 52km during the first week to 92km by the fourth week. From the fifth week, I incorporated hill works and speed work on Monday and Tuesday's respectively. My Wednesday work out were made of mid-week long runs of between 15km -25km. While Thursday's I focused on tempo runs. These are fast paced non-stop runs. On Friday's I would take it easy, with a slow short run, nothing more than 10km. Saturday's were focused on intense long runs. While Sunday was my rest days. I tried to maintain this routine with a 95% achievement rate for 10 weeks. My average mileage was 100km per week. By Week 15, I was fit to run the marathon. All my readings from my weight to speeds, endurance level measured by Garmin and Strava were pointing to the right directions. I was good to go. However, I had 5 more weeks to go.

The Uncertainties

Other than running, I have a full-time day job that involves occasional travel. During week 16 and 17 I was due for travel. This is the time I had planned to work on my last long run. Some travels can be disruptive to running due to the sudden change of terrain, and altitude. This was my case. My new environment offered steeper hills which I thought was good, but it worked against me later. I was also used to softer grounds for running, I was surrounded with tarmac. The altitude was at sea level, meaning I was to lose the accumulated red blood cells that I had gained due to high altitude training. I had to work with what I had. When doing my normal hill works on the steep hills, I suffered an injury on the foot due to the high gradient. This was aggravated with a speed run that I did on the hard

tarmac. Upon my return to Nairobi, the physio examined the injury and placed me on bench (a term loosely used by runners to mean no more running).

A few days later, and after several visits to the physio, I was given the green light to resume training. However, it came with a condition run at slow speeds of greater than 6:00 min/Km. I would have gone to jail several times, if my physio had a speed camera. It was very difficult to maintain the speeds instructed.

Race Week

One week prior to the Chicago Marathon, I was not out of the woods yet, but I was feeling much better. The weekend before race day I ran 20km at a time of 1:18:25 one of my fastest speeds and this gave me the much-needed confidence I was looking for. On the downside, I flared my injury and I was placed on the bench again. This time until race day. When you have invested your time, energy, finances and lots of sacrifice to run any marathon and you get injured, the feeling is devastating. I know one guy who did not make it to the start line of one of the Majors because he could not run the day before. It was painful for him. These things happen. Our experiences help us understand what to do or not do in future. I was unperturbed by how I would run in Chicago and my aim was just to cross the finish line.

The Windy City

The windy city blew me off when we arrived. Upon our arrival, with about 8 of us who had travelled on the same flight, we got to our apartments and changed for a Jog. I was desperately wanting to join the group. Instead, I joined them as a camera man. A little run as I took pictures would be the best way to see part of this beautiful city. As I took photos, I was awed by the city. For a moment time remained still as I stood at Grant Park which overlooked the tall architectural building on one end and as the cold crispy air blew from Lake Michigan from the other end.



Race Day

0730hrs and the gun goes off. This is it! Let's do this!! There are various ways people motivate themselves. For me, those are words that go through my mind when starting any marathon. Running with a backdrop of an injury, my top most goal was to finish. Another goal which ranked lower, was to improve my PB. A fete I was sure could happen as the injury was kept at bay thanks to the anti-inflammatory I was taking.

2km into the run, and my GPS signals must have thought Kipchoge was the wearer of the watch. I had covered Km 2 at a pace of 1:44min/km. Firstly, I don't think I had covered 2km and secondly, if that was my pace, I would have been next to the elites. Later I came to understand the GPS signals were being messed up by the tall buildings, an argument that I'm still in denial. So here I was, into a race with messed up distances and pace. What else could go wrong? Well for the distances, I would have to rely on organisers markings, I told self. However, there was another problem. Where I come from, we measure milk in litres not ounces, temperature in degrees Centigrade not Fahrenheit, weight in Kilogrammes not pounds, distance in Kilometres and not miles. If you follow the drift, I was in a dilemma of converting miles into Kilometres every time I came through the organiser's markings.

What could get harder than running a marathon at the same time converting miles to Kilometres. I've tried it before and it sucks. Probably we should incorporate this in our training....

Back into the race and I had my name being called out from behind, it was Jack Ndegwa. Another avid runner and training partner. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked him what the distance was according to his watch. With a disclaimer, "I'm not sure, but it reads 7km" he responded. The GPS - Tall building interference had affected his watch as well, but the margin between his readings and mine were way off by 2km. I tried to keep up with Ndegwa for at least 10 seconds, and for the first time, I had not witnessed the kind of speeds he was moving at. His form was great, and he was swinging those arms like our Kenyan Elites. I resolved to run my race. As he faded away, I kept asking what secret formula he had discovered. All I remember before the race, he was listening to some "*Mugithi*" songs. Probably this is what made him glide like a train.

It was not long before I got to the organisers marking of 10km. I was delighted someone had thought of saving us from the conversion hustle. I compared this distance with my watch and the margin of error was still a whooping 2km. A few minutes into my run I was delighted to see another organisers mark of 15km. My conversion problems were over, and I could now focus on the run. My pace was better than I expected when I crossed 21km with a time of 1hr:21mins. This was despite the heavy rains that were pounding, and the strong winds blowing from Lake Michigan. The injury was at its best behaviour at 30km which I crossed in less than 2hours (my goal during training). In retrospect, it was 1hr 56mins. I got that mixed feeling. "Will it be a PB or a fail?" question to self. A PB was in the offing if the status quo remains, but again anything could happen within the next 12kms. The approach would be to take 1km at a time



I crossed the 35km organisers marking with the status quo not having changed much. However, things started to go horribly wrong as I approached 36km. My pace dropped from 3:57min/km to 4:11min/km. There was no enough thrust to propel the body. Every time I tried to push, a flicker of pain from the injury spot shot through my body and the results showed in dwindling pace. My focus shifted to finishing the race, even if it meant walking, crawling or hanging on to someone. “You only have 6km to go”, I consoled myself. Those 6 Kms remain the longest and toughest for me in my years of running marathons. I noticed everyone passing me and I thought I was running backwards. I tried a banana for two reasons because the lovely ladies were dishing them out furiously to get attention and because I needed a dose of something to give me that needed energy. For sure the banana and lovely smiles from the ladies helped. The sugar from the banana added some different taste to my mouth and I felt great. At 40km, David Thuo my other training partner caught up with me. I didn’t have to explain to him what I was going through. He had noticed as he approached me from the back, I had developed a new-found running form. He encouraged me to hang in there as we had 2kms to go. The words were uplifting, and they gave me some lease of life.

I trudged on and saw the 800m mark. I was in despair. I mean, “how much longer does one need to run?” question to self. 800m is equivalent to two laps on a field. This is long and my expectation was nothing but a finish line. I continued with my hobble and made a right turn and saw the 200m mark

to the finish. I looked further ahead and there it was, the glittering placard of the finish line. As I inched closer to the finish, I ran faster and faster. I would have sworn I was on some type of witchcraft. I could see the clock now as it ticked away the minutes and secs, 2:49:52, 2:49:55, 2:49:59. I knew I would do this. I finally crossed the finish line at a time of 2:50:33. This was exactly 2 mins faster than my New York Marathon PB which was at 2:52:33. The coincidental 33 secs still baffles me and to make it even stranger it appears in all my last 3 Marathons (recall above the Kilimanjaro Marathon that I did this year). Moving on, Jack finished at a time of 2:42 while David at 2:48 a big improvement on their PB. It was time to celebrate. My new-found bounce (due to the injury) as we headed to the left luggage with David and Ndegwa slowed them down. The freezing temperatures did little to help me enjoy the finisher's beer. I was glad I had finished without the crawling or walk that I would have ended up doing. This run remains one of my toughest due to the conditions I ran in -Injury and weather. However, I have learnt a lot from this experience.

Parting shot

Every marathon carries some life lessons. For me I took home the following;

1. Always try all options available at your disposal as you never know which one will end up working for you.
2. Proper planning does not mean that you will always end up with the right results. Uncertainties can throw the best plans into disarray and therefore one needs to alter the plan to suit the new elements in the environment.
3. One can still achieve better results despite unforeseen calamities. Not giving up and remaining resilient and focused delivers surprise results.
4. We make sacrifices to achieve certain rewards. Sacrifice does not mean punishing yourself. It means foregoing comfort by pursuing your passion for better rewards.

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