



Following the disappointment of a dreaded DNS at Donadea 50k (due to some foot/ankle injuries at the back end of 2016) I wanted to kick start 2017 with some early running goals. This year, I plan to participate in longer, slower, flat & friendly events and they do not come much flatter or friendlier than The Rotterdam Marathon. Ideally I'd have a 12 week training programme for a marathon but given the aforementioned injuries that became a 6 week plan so the objectives for this event were to use it as an early season fitness gauge & confidence builder but mostly to just enjoy the day/weekend.

Logistics for this event couldn't be simpler. A Saturday morning Ryanair flight to Amsterdam followed by a short direct rail connection to Rotterdam Centraal. From there everything is close by. I stayed in a fairly basic but quaint hotel (The Light Hotel – Gravenhijkwal) but the city offers everything from 2 – 5 star accommodation at very reasonable prices. I travelled with ATC & YPOM pal Mick O'Connor (we met Kevin Rajaratnam & other friends over there too) and after a quick and easy bib collection at the Expo (In the World Trade Centre building!) we set about enjoying the local hospitality. Yes, we shot straight to the Irish bar Paddy Murphy's to ehhhh have some food and watch the Aintree Grand National, before an early & restful night. We swear we did!

The event itself, kicked off at 10am Sunday morning and the organisation couldn't be faulted. The city's road network closes down for this event and it is massively supported by the locals. Even during my 8:30am 1.5k walk from the hotel to the start line I must have been told "Succes" or "geniet van je dag" a dozen times by shop owners, council workers, Joe Clogs at the tram stop. The first phrase I confidently translated to "success or good luck" the second I wasn't so sure at the time but subsequently found out it meant "enjoy your day" and not "get in the dog van" as I initially thought!

Anyway, upon arriving at Coolsingel, the location of the start/finish line, I met up with Mick and just enjoyed the pre-race vibes and chilled atmosphere. There's music and fanfare but the general feeling is one of calmness and encouragement. The weather was really kind to us too; in fact you could feel the heat on your neck as the sun snuck up over the city skyscrapers as we "warmed up" in the start pens. We didn't see Kevin "Marathon Man" Rajaratnam as he had taken up his place in the elite section. Mick (due to his recent injuries) joined me in the "crooked auld fella" section with a plan to take it nice and easy and see if we could get each other past the 21k marker. As we set off (on the button of 10.10am – our allotted start time) I expected it to be a challenging but enjoyable journey around Rotterdam City.

While myself and Mick spoke repeatedly about taking it nice 'n hand we of course threw that idea out the window as soon as the gun went off. We took off like two Irish greyhounds (panting and sweating) through the city, over the spectacular Erasmus bridge (2k), passing the Feyenoord stadium (5k) and through the largely suburban districts of Lombardijen (10k),

Charlois (20k) & Feijenoord (25k) on the South side of the city, before returning back over the Erasmus bridge (27k) and making our way North through Cool District & Rubroek (30k) before starting a very green and thankfully partially shaded loop around Park Rozenburg. Completing the 42k route back at Coolingsingel, which had the feel of The Mall in London on Coronation day!

From the start you couldn't help but be lifted by the amazing support. Every mile there were DJ's, drum bands, cheerleaders, singers, people dressed up in orange face paint and wigs, waving signs and flags. It had the feel of a parade more than a marathon. Everyone smiling and dancing, shouting encouragement. Families parked up with picnics along the canals & green areas. I know you race your own race but for this event more than any other I took massive energy from the crowd support. I've since heard an estimated 800,000 people came out to support runners which I don't doubt, despite the total population of Rotterdam being only 1.4m. Clearly Rotterdam has some Team Kavanagh heritage in it!

Unfortunately for me, I lost sight of Mick around the 15k mark but for the first 90mins or so we chatted, shared the wow factor of the views, the crowd support, and spurred each other on. In hindsight we probably spurred each other on too much as we both literally ran into trouble with injuries, fuelling & hydration at different points in the race. While the course is as flat a route as you're likely to ever come across (total elevation 76 metres according to the Garmin), the heat on that particular day was an issue. By midday it was mid 20's and feeling much hotter. It made for a tough 2nd half but again the support you received (especially when flailing through the tough sections) was unforgettable. At around 35k there was a series of 5-6 giant screens sharing video messages from loved ones. A pure class idea & had many people in tears. I heard that 17,000 registered for this event. 15,000 started with 13,000 completing the course, so quite a large percentage didn't finish. Thankfully the ATC 3, along with our other Irish friends did & in very respectable times too considering the conditions.

All in all a tough day but a fabulous marathon experience and an event I highly recommend for its organisation, atmosphere & friendliness (both in terms of support and the course itself). I know this year's ATC gang will definitely be back in 2018 – We've already reserved our spot in Paddy Murphy's for the post marathon celebrations.

Bedankt voor de herinneringen Rotterdam

