

Estonia, 18 February 2012

G'day everyone

With so many interesting stories coming out of Europe from ABA members, I thought I'd throw another in the mix.

This is my first trip to Europe. Why now?

I've always been in awe of the large and long Worldloppet marathon races and had an ambition to compete in them all. My first was the Hoppet in 1991. I did the two North American Loppets in 1996, and the Japanese Sapporo Marathon in 2010, so you might think I am in no rush.

I'm entered in eight marathons over a six week period. Such a long way to go, so I thought I'd get most of them completed in one trip. I'm sharing a lot of the travel with two Navy team members, Martin Lindsay and David Michael. They are both going strong and also filling their passport with Worldloppet stamps. Martin and David had already completed the Austrian and Italian Marathons before I linked up with them.

The 50 km King Ludwig German Marathon was held in Bavaria, passing through postcard-worthy valleys, surrounded by spectacular mountains. A lovely course, which goes past one of Ludwig's castles. Minus 23 Celsius at the start, and it didn't get much warmer.

Before the race was over, 16 participants were hospitalised with frostbite and many more suffered with mild cases. Due to the numbers being injured, during the race the officials cut off a loop, reducing the distance by 10 km. I managed to get through before the cutoff, but was among those with some mild frostbite. I didn't realise it at the time, but the night after the race I could feel a pins and needles sensation around my cheeks and jaw. The next day the skin was discoloured and blistered. It was a bit like sunburn, and after about a week, the dead skin had peeled. No long term damage. Results don't look that impressive, having come 167th out of a couple of thousand, however for me it's all about the stamp in the Worldloppet passport.

The following week was the hilly 76 km Transjurassienne in France. The race follows some long, undulating valleys, and there are a couple of tree covered ranges where the course crosses from one valley to the next. It was not quite as cold as the German race, but it had a tremendous headwind. It was very hard going in the open valleys (away from the trees) and the best tactic was to ski in a big bunch. Had to offset downhill at times. It was actually a relief upon reaching the hilly sections, because the trees blocked the wind. Well over five hours of racing for me, I was very pleased to see the finish.

Generally, most marathon racers are quite similar. Often, but not always, past their prime, yet competitive and determined. The mutual respect among those that finish a long tough race is strong and transcends all language, cultural and national differences. Sharing the common experience with like-minded people is one of the attractions. There are a lot of people doing the ski marathons. Think of the number in the Hoppet, then add a zero and double it. Thousands of racers. No matter the standard, the race will always provide competitors slightly faster, slower or the same as each competitor.

Exhausted, clothed and fed after the French race, I caught the shuttle bus back toward the town where I was accommodated. While discussing the race with an English-speaking French racer sitting next to me, we saw two skiers silhouetted in the encroaching dusk. It was about 5.30 pm and the skiers were still going strong and they had about six km until the finish. The race had started at 8.30 am!. Those guys had been suffering the headwind for over nine hours! Now that's tough. As we watched the racers in awe, the Frenchman and I agreed that competitors still racing were far tougher than those that had finished hours earlier.

That's marathon racing. It's all about making the distance.

Tomorrow morning is the Estonian 63 km classic race. Bring it on.

Greg Paul