

San Silvestre Vallecana, Madrid - December 31st 2010

Finishing in a position of 4928 is not the sort of detail one would ordinarily wish to share with others, but when set to the background of what is one of, if not the, largest 10k races in Europe with around 27,000 competitors, then the positioning becomes more understandable.

I hadn't gone to compete in Madrid's San Silvestre Vallecana 10k specifically, but having seen the event on TV on previous Christmas visits to my wife's family in Spain's capital, I felt suitably inspired this year to take part – a useful balance to the habitual gluttony of Christmas, as well as a useful objective to get the competitive juices flowing in what I suspect for most triathletes, is a fairly fallow period of the year.

Pre registration in Madrid involved picking up a timing chip and Nike sponsored running vest in the days prior to the race. You are also allocated a race start and wave, this dependent upon previous race times and those under 50 minutes went off in the first wave with 3 successive waves every 15 minutes. The first wave is further subdivided into smaller time categories, so those running sub 37mins were first at the starting line. I found myself in the sub 45 minute holding pen, though I had actually put myself down for the 45-48 minutes section, a pre regulation oversight which had seen my previous 45-13 best interpreted generously as under 45 minutes. However, judging from some of the plodders that I eventually passed, I was far from the only one whose previous



performances had been overestimated. Indeed, trying to thread my way through the field at the beginning was a little over putting and frustrating, a reminder of the downsides of mass participation events.

The race starts at the home of Real Madrid football club, the stately Santiago Bernabeu stadium and the official countdown to the start is preceded by videos of support from some of Spain's most famous sportsmen, such as Nadal and Iniesta, exhorting us all to supreme and sublime efforts. A brief incline starts the race before leading into a prolonged downward

Above: Performance graph with time/speed/topography

Below: With brother in law (left)



stretch which sees runners go down Calle Serrano (Serrano Street), home to the city's boutique shopping, past the Plaza Colon (Columbus Square) celebrating the discovery of the New World and then onto the Paseo de la Castellana, the city's central and largest artery hosting many of Madrid's best hotels and museums. The course then runs past Atocha station, one of the city's main transport interchanges and site of the terrorist attack in 2004 which killed 191 people on several commuter trains, and then down the gentle slope of the Avenida de Barcelona before reaching the working class area of Vallecas (from where the race gets its name) at KM8, where the gradient reverses and runners have to endure a rise of around 50 metres over the following kilometre, a real measure of endurance before the final km threads its way through the suburban areas of Vallecas and on to the finish at the Teresa Ribero Stadium home to another important football team in the capital, Rayo Vallecano. Here you flop over the final timing mat before exchanging your timing chip for a rather limited goodie bag of 2 bottled drinks and a limp cereal bar before hunting down the one of a

hundred white vans which has transferred your kit from start to finish prior to the race.

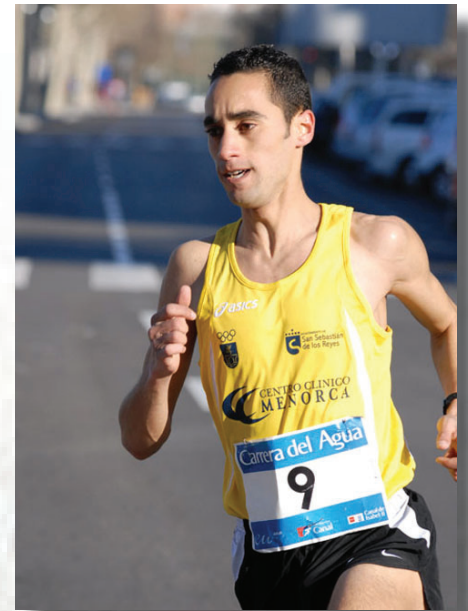
Crowds lining the route give generous support for much of race, especially near the end, and my wife in particular seemed to have spent much of the race giving high 5s to excited children and generally soaking up the atmosphere of her home city.

Unfortunately I found myself running on one of those days when the body just doesn't seem to respond and though I went through 5km in 22.5 mins (helpfully there are distance markers every 0.5km), I was already acutely aware that I wasn't operating at 100%. This was a disappointment, though not a complete surprise; a day of travelling, 2 restless and unsatisfactory nights sleep in an airless hotel room, lots of shuttling between hotel and parents in law, over indulgent eating and drinking meant that I would equally have been as comfortable watching the whole thing on TV as actually competing.

As a result, my attempts to keep up with the 45 minute marker man (this useful innovation, which I hadn't seen before, involved selected runners attached to large coloured balloons

with a certain race pace e.g. 37 min, 42,45, 50, 60 minutes written on them, the balloon floating visibly above the bobbing heads) were generally fine until the half way mark, after which I began to gradually lose touch and by the end, the 45 minute marker balloon was just a pinpoint in the distance. Worse though was to follow, as during the incline in the final section of the race when my forces were flagging, I saw the fancy dress crew creep up on me and so I suffered the ignominy of being passed by both a chicken and, to my eternal shame, a can of beer!

Admittedly, a finishing time of 47.35 was not desperately disappointing, but on a generally downward course, I'd hoped to have gone much closer to the 45 minute mark. The very handy graph of an individual's results, measuring times at 2.5/5/7.5 and 10k, clearly show where it went wrong for me i.e. half way, and though while I've already outlined my 'excuses' for my relative weakness, especially over the second half of the race, I was also left wondering whether Madrid's 600-700 metres above sea level had anything to do with performance – I certainly felt abnormally weary both during and



Above: Eventual winner of the popular race, Anouar Dabab

Below: Dabab's winning graph compared to yours truly!

after the race, my legs in particular felt lifeless at a certain point – was it because they simply weren't getting enough oxygen?

The 'popular' race was eventually won by the Moroccan athlete, Anouar Dabab, who finished in 29.13, some way in front of the next athlete (see his graph with mine in comparison). He probably should have been in the elite race which started a couple of hours after the main mass race and sees a group of 150 sub 35 minute runners take on a very similar course. The winner of this clocked 28.27.

Regardless of any excuses I was creative enough to make up, it was a great experience to be a part of, seeing vast seas of nodding figures stretching out both in front and behind, the shouts of support from the Madrileños, and the chance to run through some of Madrid's most celebrated streets was something worth repeating, especially if going flat out for PBs isn't the main objective.

