



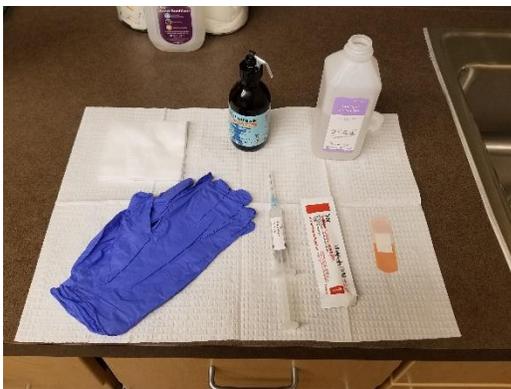
My 2020 Mesa-PHX Marathon journey began on October 4, 2019, the day I led a 13-year old runner, who I spent months coaching, across the finish line of his very first half-marathon, the Portland Half-Marathon. The smile on my face masks it, but I was in severe pain. I would later find out that I have a few on-going problems with my left knee that can cause severe inflammation and pain.

After the Portland Marathon, I was supposed to begin a rigorous 18-week training program that would help prepare me to run a marathon within 3 hours and 5 minutes, the time a 41-year-old man needs to complete a marathon for in order to safely qualify to run the Boston Marathon. Ideally, you want to be 100% healthy at the start of a training program. Unfortunately, I wasn't even able to bend my left leg

beyond a 45-degree angle.

Another obstacle of mine was that the previous training programs I laid out for myself became stale. No matter how much I ran, I wasn't becoming any faster. Fortunately, I met Paul Taylor (IG: @pt105) through the 2019 Eugene Marathon Embassador program, a program that provides running-related benefits, in exchange for Eugene Marathon promotion. Paul and I basically have everything in common, including a similar running-history. We have such good chemistry, we're more like brothers (the kind that get along) than friends or acquaintances. I ended up asking Paul if he would be my running mentor and coach, which he kindly said yes. He went over the training plan I created for myself, offered advice, and went on to periodically conduct virtual meetings (Paul's Canadian) with me to answer questions that came up, and frankly be an awesome coach and friend.

I can't talk about this journey without pointing out that I actually had 2 coaches for this marathon. My other coach was Kristy (IG: @vegfullife), my amazing and beautiful wife. Kristy is, and has always been there to help keep me physically and mentally-ready for any challenge my training or marathon throws my way.



Shortly after the Portland Marathon, I went to one of my Orthopedic Surgeons (yes, I have more than one) for a cortisone shot knee-injection. It really helped my knee in the past, so I thought it was worth a shot (no pun intended).



Within days, after my cortisone injection, I felt like I had a new knee! This marathon training cycle was different than my previous training cycles. I focused less on weekly mileage and more on the types of workouts I was doing and making every workout count! In the past, I always incorporated a whole variety of workouts. The only thing I did differently this time was I tweaked my training a bit to where I ran fewer miles, but damn did these workouts kick my butt!



I incorporated cross-training: cycling, elliptical, yoga, meditation, and a ton of strength-training at the gym that I belong to.



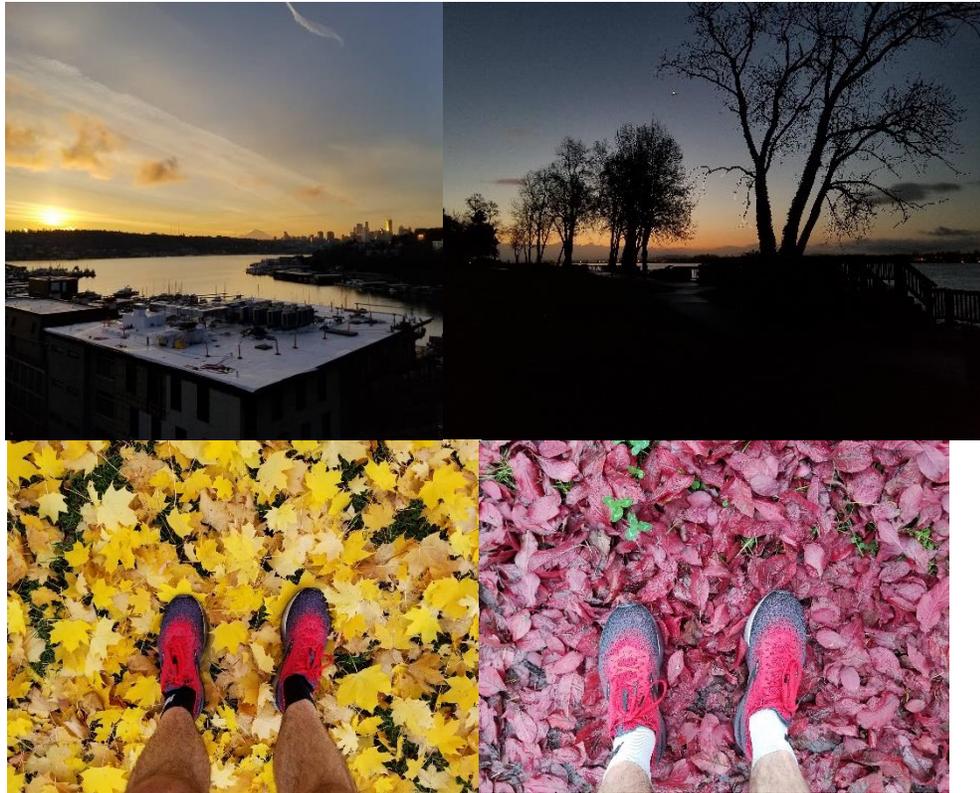
I ran in the dark.



I ran in rain and ice.



I ran in Washington, Oregon, and even Texas!



I witnessed incredible sunrises and observed Fall transition to Winter.



I ran on Steve Prefontaine's trail.



I ran in costumes.



Even when things became tough and there were a few bumps in the road,



Nov. running miles: 182.5



January running miles: 202.4



January elliptical miles: 21.2

Total January miles: 223.58

I continued putting everything I had into every single workout, week-after-week, month-after-month.



I ate well and took care of myself (including soaking in ice-bathwater).



I made sure to have fun and embrace the whole experience.





The night before it was finally time to run the marathon that I had worked so hard for, Kristy and I sat in our Tempe Airbnb, ate our Whole Foods hot bar meal while we watched the Golden Girls. Every night before a big event, I watch relaxing, low-key television to help calm my nerves.

Every Friday, the day before every long-run-Saturday, for the past 4 months, I ate the same meals: toast, smothered with nut butter for breakfast, smoothie for lunch, and a bowl with brown rice, a few low-fiber veggies, a few greens, covered in a light nut-based sauce. Today's meals were no different.

After a couple episodes of the Golden Girls, Kristy and I prepared everything for the next day, and then went to bed at 7pm. After around 2.5 hours of interrupted-light sleeping, the alarm clock went off at 3am. I rolled out of bed and performed the same ritual that I did during every Saturday long-run morning, during training. I drank a full glass of water, took a couple bites of my gluten-free, vegan, toast, smeared with raw cashew butter, drank a few ounces of dark-roast coffee.



After brushing my teeth and combing my hair, I applied coconut oil to chafe-prone areas and surgical tape to blister-prone areas. I use virgin coconut oil instead of Vaseline, or similar products, because Vaseline is not vegan and is very gross, if you think about it. Plus using coconut oil is more environmentally friendly and makes you smell good. Then I put on my marathon gear: 2-in-1 dri-fit Brooks shorts, minimalist Swiftwick socks, brand new Asics singlet (a recent gift from Kristy), a pair of glove liners (to keep my hands warm and to carry gels), and a pink pair of Nike Next% shoes. Since I was going to be riding on a marathon-arranged high school bus to the start line, where I expected to be cold, I added another layer of clothing: sweat pants, a long-sleeve dri-fit shirt, a hoodie, a ROAD iD bracelet (a bracelet with health and

emergency contact information on it, and a quote/mantra from my mother), and my Garmin GPS wrist watch. Side note: I picked up the long-sleeve shirt and hoodie at a Portland Goodwill store a couple prior, which seemed meant-to-be as the hoodie had the University of Arizona Wildcats logo printed on it.



I don't know what I would have done without Kristy's help, but she made sure I made it to the bus-boarding area without a single hiccup. While Kristy drove, I ate the rest of my breakfast (toast with raw cashew butter).

Since many of the roads were closed off to public traffic, a bus ride was my only option to the start line. I said my goodbyes to Kristy and boarded the bus around 5am. I am a very quiet and reserved person, and because I tend to have a lot of social anxiety, I brought a miniature mp3 player, loaded with guided meditations, with me. Unfortunately, the other marathoners on the bus were so boisterous, I could not hear the audio through the mp3 player earbuds. Fortunately, I brought a whole drop-bag full of goodies, including ear plugs. I shoved the earplugs in my ears and pulled the hood portion of my hoodie over my head. I closed my eyes and took long deep breathes for the first few miles of the bus ride. Once the bus entered the Salt River Reservation, I happened to look out the bus window and notice how beautifully the landscape was being illuminated by light from the Snow Moon. Only one word came to mind that could describe the moonlit rocky, cacti-covered terrain: majestic. The beauty in the Pacific Northwest, where I live, is magical and breathtaking, but this was a totally different, yet equal type of beauty. The bus ride led me to the marathon start area in Utery Mountain Regional Park.

Thankfully, because it was so cold outside, the event staff arranged to allow the marathoners to stay on the buses to stay warm, which is exactly what I did. The bus ride only lasted 40 minutes, so I had around 50 minutes to kill. I used this time to do a little dynamic stretching, or at least did what I could with the limited space in a high school bus seat. I also spent time preparing for the marathon, by strategically placing 5 Endurance Tap gels (packets of maple syrup, ginger, and salt) in my shorts pockets and gloves, using a porta-potty a couple of times, dropping off my drop-bag at a participant bag drop-off truck to be picked up after I finish, and dropping off the hoodie in a clothing donation pile (the clothing goes to a local charity).

The size of the starting area and the marathon participant crowds were larger than I am used to, plus the lack of organization made things seem a little chaotic to me. The start line was a little farther from the buses than I realized, so before I knew it, the fireworks went off (indicating the start of the marathon), leaving me no time to perform a proper pre-marathon warm up. I rushed to the start line, where I noticed I was starting the marathon with the 4:45 pacing group. I needed to be closer to the 3:05, which was probably way ahead of me at this point. The crowd was so large, I had to weave my way back and forth, around people, and on and off the road. To give you an idea of how chaotic the starting area was, after passing the 4:45 pacing group, I caught up with a 5+ hour pacing group. Luckily, it only took a couple miles for me to catch up to, and pass, the 3:35 pacing group.

It didn't take long for the Arizona sunrise to appear. I looked to my left and watched the horizon turn to a deep ruby color. The landscape and cacti appeared as silhouettes against the red sky. It was so beautiful; it required a lot of focus to look away. Even with some tightness from not properly warming up, I felt strong and fast. The first few miles were downhill. The air was clear and crisp, I had no trouble breathing. Soon, the marathon route went through very pretty, well-manicured neighborhoods (clearly a wealthier area of Mesa). Then the route took a right turn and headed up a slight, but very long uphill section, which lasted for about 2 miles. Then the route went downhill for another mile or so. At around mile 7, I started to settle into a nice steady pace. My left side felt tight, but the effort still felt easy. So

easy, that I was able to look around and take in all the views around me. I noticed a group of beautiful monk parakeets in a nearby tree. I watched small prop airplanes take off from nearby Falcon Field Airport. I saw the Boeing-Mesa factory, where the Boeing Company makes the Apache helicopter.

When the Arizona sun rises, it doesn't take long for things to warm up. When I made it to mile 10, it was time for me to lose my long-sleeve shirt. After 10 miles of the marathon, there seemed to be a pattern to the route: 2-mile straight away, 90-degree turn; 2-mile straight away, 90-degree turn. I really enjoyed absorbing the energy from spectators and cheer groups. There seemed to be a cheer group every 2 miles, each one with a unique theme, and spectating groups were sprinkled throughout the marathon, mostly toward the end.

Around mile 19, I saw a very large 4-engine military jet, that was carrying what appeared to be a small aircraft on top of it, take off from a local airport (perhaps it took off from Luke Air Force Base or the Arizona National Guard?). When I made it to mile 24, I was amazed with how well I had been able to maintain a good pace; I usually crash by this point. Unfortunately, miles 23.5-25.5 were my least favorite of the marathon. It was the last 2-mile straight away, but this time the pavement was slanted to the left (the direction of my tight leg). The pain in my left leg became intense. Pain shot from my knee to my lower back, all the way down to my left foot. The general late-marathon muscle pain and fatigue was nothing compared to the pain in my knee; it made me want to stop. Around mile 25, I reached the last water station. Up until now, I had not stopped running; no walking breaks, not even while grabbing or drinking water. The last water stop was the only time I walked, which was for a very brief time.



Just before I completed mile 26, I could see Bass Pro Shops in the distance. I'm not a fan of the store, but I knew that the finish line was near its parking lot. The pavement stopped slanting, adrenaline and excitement rushed through me, so I stepped on the gas pedal. I gave the last part of the marathon everything I had left. I took the last 90-degree turn, I was passing other runners left and right. I high-fived at least a dozen cheering finish-line spectators, as I ran past. Emotion rushed through me as I saw that I was about to set a new PR and I heard the announcer respond to the strong effort that I was putting into the final yards of the marathon. My heart melted, tears ran down my cheeks; I just finished my 9th marathon, I PR'd, and I felt like I could run another 3 miles or so.

I took a few minutes to gather myself, grab some water, stretch a little, and find Kristy. All the work that I put in over the past few months paid off big time. I may not have qualified for Boston, nor did I qualify for the Chicago Marathon, but I left nothing on the course. I put everything I had, mentally and physically, into this marathon, and nothing can take away this feeling of accomplishment, this pride.



Kristy and I spent the rest of the day celebrating. We went for smoothie bowls at Foxy Fruit Acai Bowls & Smoothies, went for a short hike in the Phoenix Mountains Preserve, and then went for a wonderful dinner at Green New American Vegetarian. It was the most amazing day; one that I will never forget!

I tend to find small details fascinating, especially details that leave you saying, “interesting” or “ah ha.” Two small details about my experience I will leave you with are:



1) I created a 7.5-hour random playlist of music to listen to while running the marathon. The music was stored on my Garmin GPS watch, which I was listening through bluetooth earbuds. I paused the music periodically to focus or take in my surroundings. My playlist consisted of many artists ranging from Guns N Roses to Van Halen to Megadeth to Billy Idol to Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch (yep, Music For The People pumps me up). The very last song I was listening to, before pausing it at mile 25.5, was L.A. Woman by Billy Idol.

2) After running a marathon, I often end up with a bloody blister, scratch, or messed up toenail. This time, the only thing I ended up with was a small, bloody scratch on the top of my left foot of all places. As I type this, I still wear it with pride.



Distance: 26.26
Elevation gain: 282 ft
Official completion time: 3:33:54
Pace: 8:10 min/mile
Gender place: 424/1285