

Run Like Crazy

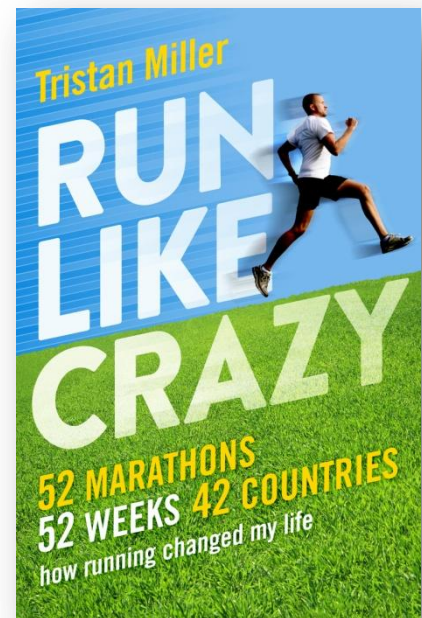
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Extract

ZURICH MARATHON

1 January, Zurich, Switzerland

3:42.32



On 27 December 2009, Darren and I boarded a Singapore Airlines flight to Zurich. Some family and friends came to the airport to bid us farewell. My mum, Cherryann, was a bit teary, but she knew this was one of the biggest moments of my life so she was incredibly proud too. My eldest sister, Rebecca, was excited, but I knew she was also jealous: she loves adventure and travel. 'See you in New York!' she said as she hugged me. The New York Marathon was in November; I just grinned at her, silently hoping I would make it that far.

Earlier in the day, I'd stood in the morning sun while giving an interview to a Melbourne TV station. Christmas had passed and they were looking for stories to fill the slow period up to New Year's. I was so nervous about the TV appearance that my thigh started shaking uncontrollably. I don't think it came over on camera, but I felt like that leg was going to bounce away. On top of that, I was boasting about my 'amazing' running ability, which would have me travelling the whole world, smashing out a marathon every week, when really I wasn't even sure how the first one would go.

I'd been recovering from an adductor injury. After I'd strained this muscle in my thigh, I went through a lengthy course of rehab. With the help of my mate Kevlar, who was also my physio, I managed to come good. Kevlar gave me lots of time and showed great patience (even when I wasn't listening to him), helping me get on track for the year ahead.

'Wow, this is incredible,' said the presenter. 'How do you think you'll manage it?'

'I'm going to take it one race at a time,' I boldly stated. 'I'm just going to get out there and have a go!'

It was a very Aussie thing to say and seemed to placate the interviewers. I'm not sure how many Aussies really do have a go, but we say it a lot, so there

must be an element of truth to it. In actual fact, I was relatively new to the whole game.

Once we got to Zurich, I was well and truly out of my comfort zone. I'd left 30°C days in Melbourne and arrived in the middle of one of Europe's coldest winters on record. Daz and I were rugged up but hadn't packed any big jackets, as they would have taken up too much space in our packs.

My other sister, Alexis, was coming over from her home in London to cheer me on for race number one – it'd take place on New Year's Eve. The race was due to start at midnight: the first minute of the first day of 2010. On the way to the starting place that icy-cold night, I was filled me with trepidation, but this was soon overwhelmed by an unearthly feeling. I'd actually made it.

At the sports hall where the start line was, the Swiss were pretty well wrapped up. Everyone was wearing plenty of layers, including track jackets, beanies and gloves. I was a little less prepared; I'd just donned my SKINS compression gear with a RunLikeCrazy T-shirt over the top.

I talked to myself throughout the countdown. 'This is your time, my friend. Think strong and believe in yourself.'

Then we were off . . .

A few brave souls clustered near the start of the race and at various checkpoints along the way to cheer us on. The course follows a trail along the Limmat River, which runs through Zurich. From the sports hall we headed to the river, then we began a long 10-km loop, with the last loop finishing up back at the hall.

Most runners wore head torches. But there was a full moon and although a lot of fog was about, plenty of natural light guided our way. Actually, I wouldn't have wanted a torch anyway: you end up focusing on that one spot of light and lose sense of where you are. I mean, I was running along a Swiss river in the middle of the night on New Year's Eve, for Pete's sake! Fireworks were going off every few seconds on the horizon. That was a scene you wanted to remember.

I felt good for the entire run. My adductor strain gave me a couple of pinches, tightening up a few times through the distance. I slowed to a walk at the drink stations and that loosened it up.

The last lap just felt good. I had left a lovely Italian bloke behind on lap three. He'd told me how he needed running to keep him focused and fit for his two baby sons. The eldest was now so quick that chasing him was all the training my new friend needed. As I left him in the mist and charged on to finish my first run, I was alone, unable to see more than 20 metres in front and nothing

behind. I was on my own in the Swiss night, with only about 6 kms to go. Right then, I realised, was the moment I'd been hoping for – the moment of clarity. Here I was really running around the world. My little dream was an actual adventure! I started storming home, passing struggling runners in their own worlds of pain, and wishing them a 'Guten Morgen'.

I turned off and ran into the hall. I spotted Alexis cheering for me and Daz with the camera going. I completed it in 3:42.32. No PB (personal best), but it felt great. They even had awards for the fastest athlete from each country, so being the only Australian, I cleaned up. Daz knocked off his 10 kms in 55.51, a top effort. He even got a gong for being the fastest Kiwi!

Marathon 1, tick.

The buzz dropped away quickly. By the time we got to Berlin, I knew we were screwed. We'd missed our flight to Tel Aviv. We were set to spend my 33rd birthday, 3 January, in Israel, which would leave a few days before we needed to travel to Lake Tiberias for my next marathon. But the gods had intervened and we were now stuck in Berlin.

The thought of being stuck in the snow for my birthday was a letdown. I'd imagined sitting on a beach, watching the sun go down on a tumultuous year, and getting ready for the greatest adventure of my life. Now we'd be staying at the wrong hostel, in the wrong part of town, in the wrong country. But I still had Daz and we were determined to have a good time.

Berlin is renowned for its pub crawls, and we immediately signed up. Within a couple of hours we were drunk and Daz was taking his homework quite seriously. Before we left Australia, a very creative friend of ours, known only as 'the Jones', had concocted a list of 52 misadventures that Daz needed to complete throughout our tour. Most of them were quite silly, but that was the point, and many would expose Daz to the risk of arrest or retribution.

The task in Berlin was to start a snowball fight. Daz went for it, picking up a rather large chunk of ice and hurling it at the head of a fellow pub-crawler. There was a moment of silence, followed – thankfully – by some wild laughter and then a barrage of return fire. The most poignant moment was when Daz spilt an entire beer on his crotch in the process of negotiating a peace settlement. How Darren went home with a girl that night while reeking of beer is beyond me, but such is his magical presence.

I woke up the next day with a hangover and without a Daz. He showed up later and we tried to remember the finer details of the night. We both had a good time there was no doubt, so it had been a successful birthday.

I was happy to leave the cold when Tuesday finally rolled around. The Berlin Marathon, in September, meant I'd return to make the most of this spectacular city.

We boarded the Tui Fly plane and headed south-east.