

The Great Wall of China Marathon

The World's Toughest Marathon

By Don Eovino

There are no adjectives necessary to invoke in one's imagination more allure, enticement, and pure adrenaline rushing enthusiasm than the above title. This event would occur on my birthday (Hawaii Time) and having passed it up the previous year, my wife Hiroko and I wouldn't miss the chance.

We arrived in Beijing 5 days before the race, which would be held in Tianjian Province at a rural area called HUANGYUANGYANG, a 3-hour bus ride from our hotel. The race is owned and operated by a Danish organization and most participants are European and some Japanese. There were 500 runners for the 1/2 marathon and 26-mile marathon, and only a few of the 200 marathoners were from the U.S.A. I wrongly thought I was the only one from Hawaii. This non-tourist area of the wall is selected so that it is only accessible to the runners and aid staff on race day. Prior to the event all runners are required to perform an inspection tour by walking 2 miles on the Wall, and may bring their guests so that all may get a flavor of what is in store ahead. This proved almost fatal to my completion, as I misunderstood the effort necessary to climb 3600 steps for 2 miles 2 days before the event. I had weakened my legs by back-to-back deep tissue massages prior to this inspection. In spite of my feelings of wonderment while traversing the undulating ridge lines with superb viewing conditions of late spring in northern China, my thighs began trembling from exhaustion half-way through the climb. This was not a good thing.



The next day, just before the race, I couldn't walk across the hotel room. My quadriceps and shins had frozen up. Frustrated, I contacted the race director, who allowed that I could swap bib numbers the next morning before the start and run the half-marathon.

After staying in bed all day with my feet elevated consuming Ibuprofen, I contemplated my options. That evening, in a full state of depression, I consulted with my wife and determined that I hadn't come half way across the world to do only a 1/2 marathon, and in my present condition unable to walk a step, I was going to bag the event. Falling asleep, I was awakened by my multiple alarms I had previously set for 1 AM (necessary for a 3 hour bus ride.) I found I could hobble across the room as I headed for the

bathroom, and awakened a startled Hiroko with a yelp, that I was going for it!

After seeing the wall 2 days before with me, Hiroko's choice was to accompany me on this 3 hour bus ride leaving at 3 AM, wait 7-8 hours for me to finish in the hot sun, and then fight traffic back to Beijing for another 4 hour return trip, or hook up with her home town friend who was attending Beijing University and go shopping! Guess what her decision was? At 3 AM, alone, I was nodding off in a bus of about 30 runners from our tour headed for the 7 AM start.

Upon arriving at the fort at the base of the wall, I found I couldn't navigate the steps in the stadium. Still deciding which event to attempt I was interrupted by my running group who beckoned me over meekly, and to my surprise presented

me with a finisher's shirt signed by all with a felt pen congratulating me on my Birthday. Having lost my anonymity, I now had no choice but to plunge into the full marathon. I decided I could walk the first half and then see how I was doing on the way back. I would have to beat a cut-off time of 8 hours.

The race was a 3 mile uphill climb on a winding country park road to the mountain top and the entrance to the wall, then a two mile effort along the wall ascending and descending 3600 steps, the up hills sometimes requiring that you be on all fours as if climbing a ladder. These steps were uneven, different heights and widths, and had a rope or a railing to help in extremely steep down hills. (There was no building code in effect in 200 B.C.) There were no flat spots to run, should one even dream of doing so. At the end of the wall was a 1/2-mile steep switch back trail down the mountain back to the fort. This was followed by a 15-mile jaunt into the most quaint countryside of farms and villages, reminiscent of what rural America must have been like in the 1920's. No paved roads, kindling wood and charcoal for fuel, brick thatched homes, ubiquitous vegetable gardens with small livestock for consumption, and brown faced semi-toothless villagers smiling in wonder as these crazy runners invaded their serenity. The school children practiced their little known English by yelling "Hello" when seeing an approaching runner.

After walking for this first 13 miles my cramping and stiffening had loosened up and though I was far back in the pack I was thoroughly enjoying my scenic adventure. At mile 14, after four hours, I reached the turn around point and realized my body was loose enough to jog back. At the 21-mile mark, back at the fort, I knew I could break the cut off time, so I continued up the reverse of the mountain trail and 3600 steps of 2 more miles on the wall again. Climbing up the steep switchback for 1/2 mile I passed many exhausted runners who had burnt themselves out running the first half. I neglected to mention the temperature in the countryside was 95 degrees. One fit



looking Triathlete with an Ironman finishing shirt on was pale and ashen sitting on the trail. Seeing him after the race with an I.V poked in him having been stretchered down the wall, he mumbled he was from Chicago and trained in 46 degree temperature. Passing runners on the wall who were gingerly mastering the treacherous steps was a thrill for me at this 22 mile mark as walking had saved my energy and muscles and I was elated in my spirited of euphoria. My thoughts were interrupted by a yell from a runner I just passed who recognized my Outrigger Canoe Club burgee I had strapped around my waist for just such recognition. "Miho (Morikawa) (Joe Teipal's girlfriend) told me she had a friend who was a member of the OCC who was going to do the Great Wall of China Marathon and said he was the only one from Hawaii doing it, but I'm here to tell you there are 5 more of us!" This camaraderie was helpful at this stage of the race. I reiterated the

conversation to Miho and Joe later in Hawaii; it was a good laugh realizing how small this world was.

Concluding miles 22 and 23 on the wall, I found myself jogging back down the country park road this last 3 miles to the finish. I had beaten the cut off and finished in 7:04 minutes. The race officials pulled 34 people off the wall because of missing the 8-hour time frames or because they were delirious. I came in 150th out of 200. The winner for the second year in a row was a Chinese mailman from the same village as the race and trains on this wall during the year. He did a 3:33. Runners were advised to add 2 hours to their usual marathon time.

I consumed 20 bottles of water (I peed a lot), ate 3 bananas, 3 power bars, and 10 power gels. I didn't lose any weight, I didn't come in last, I climbed 7200 steps and I was tired, tanned and exuberant. I had survived what was truly the world's toughest marathon.

-May 25th, 2002