

SIMPLY UMU

RUNNING FULLY



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By Simply Umu

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PAUSING

After [going full distance](#) it was now time to pause and reflect on my next challenge. I took a full week off to rest properly and while reflecting, I knew one thing for sure. The full distance triathlon was a one time thing and I did not want to do something as extreme any time soon. But I was left with a weird feeling. I wanted to give myself a new challenging goal without sacrificing the other parts of my life. I had to take a closer look at my endurance journey and the more I looked at it, the more I realised I was missing something. I did indeed accomplish my goal but I started to notice that almost all of my races from the 20 km of Brussels, going on to my first marathon and finally with the Ironman, were yes completed, but in complete agony and feeling miserable. I didn't have the feeling that I had run fully. My next goal was suddenly crystal clear. I was going to run the Brussels marathon again, three years after the first one, but this time with a constant pace and with proper training. It was around October 2021, meaning that I had one year to prepare. A marathon training block usually lasts for three to four months and with my experience I knew a good strategy was to gradually build up from a 5 km race to the infamous 42,195 km one. And to spice it up, I thought of running the same races I did in 2019 and set a PB (personal best) on each of them. Now that I had a clear plan, the next step was to prepare for a 5 km PB.

5K

Before actually training, I took a whole month off of any sports to make sure my body had the time to completely recover from what I put it through and start with a clean slate. I was looking at some races but didn't find any that were close enough so I decided I would run it on my own with a self designed course. I then decided I had eight weeks to run these 5 kilometres under 20 minutes. It wasn't my first attempt as I tried back in 2020 but I paced it horribly and finished with a time of 21:30 instead. It was too ambitious and poorly planned.

As I didn't want to train as much as I did the past year, I figured that the bare minimum was two training sessions a week, with one long run and one interval training session. For the long run I made it slowly progress from 10 km to 15 km and for the interval training sessions I switched between short 400 m uphill intervals and 1000 m intervals.

I was running during winter and it was very hard to get motivated but nevertheless I showed up to every single training session and I did not skip any even though some had to be replanned. The two training sessions a week gave me plenty of room for flexibility.

The hardest part was undoubtedly the 1000m interval training sessions. With the ironman training, I was not used anymore to run that fast and more than once I felt I would throw up my lungs and wouldn't hit the given times. Luckily, I always found the mental strength to push through even though I was agonising after each interval. And by training all alone, I didn't make it easier for myself.

As I was getting closer to my PB attempt and looking at my times during the interval training sessions, I realised that my time goal of running under 20 minutes would probably be too ambitious and I changed my plan to a sub 21 which was still a personal best.

My individual time trial day came and I had planned a short route and a decreasing pace strategy. As I hate traffic lights, I planned a route next to a bike path that was straight and flat, the perfect condition to optimise my performance. I walked to the starting point, took a few deep breaths and started the timer on my watch. I was ready to do everything exactly according to plan but first, I started too fast and secondly my route was going through a bridge which was closed for the first time in months. Because I already ran one km and didn't want to plan the race for another day, I made a U-turn and while running, devised a new route. Midway in the race I realised I could not accelerate as I planned with my decreasing pace strategy so I decided to maintain it steady which was also not easy for me. And soon enough, I started the final kilometre of my race and something clicked. I started to run way faster probably because I knew I was near the end. I took a look at my watch and saw that a sub 20:30 was still feasible. At that moment I just went all out and ran as fast as I could. My body never had been so tense, pushing every single fibre of all of my muscles. When I reached the 5 km mark I stopped my watch, resisted the urge

to lay down in front of everyone, recovered my breath for a moment and looked at the watch. It showed 20:28.

10K

After the successful 5 km race, I decided to keep the same training plan and just made the long runs a bit longer. I would also run the 10 km on my own and I gave myself three months to prepare this time which made it easier to track my improvement on the interval sessions. I looked online at predicted times based on my 5 km time and I saw that I should run 42:12. It seemed impossible to me as I knew I am more built for speed and the longer the distance, the less accurate those estimations are for me. But then I thought about limiting beliefs and just set to run a sub 43 even though I wasn't really thinking it was possible. I also got many motivation problems with the winter times and ran slower than usual due to the cold. As the weeks went on, I lowered my ambitions and aimed for sub 44.

On the day of my second time trial, the weather forecast indicated a 27 km/h head wind for the last 5 km. I thought that it would be hard to hit the given times but I again did not want to reschedule the race and thought it would be good for mental strength training. So I started running based on my pace strategy that was also supposed to be decreasing but just after 3 km I had a hard time maintaining the pace so I set out to try as much as possible to maintain a steady pace. After a U-turn I was running head wind and I had to push way harder to maintain the same pace. Just like with the 5 km time trial, I managed to accelerate a lot for the last kilometre and even considered a sub 43. Unfortunately I started sprinting too early and decelerated drastically for the last 200m which meant many seconds lost. From that moment I realised I can push mentally more in the middle of the race if I can run so much faster in the last kilometre. I ultimately ran in 43:18 which I was very proud of as my last PB was around 45 minutes.

10 MILES

After the 10 km race, I had just a month to train for my first official competition of the season, the Antwerp 10 miles. I kept the same plan and just did a few longer runs. I also quite randomly set out to run a sub 1h15.

On D-Day it was a bit windy and warmer than usual. As I ran with my company just as in 2019, I couldn't choose my starting lane and I was put in a lane where I had to pass many people. It is worth mentioning that it is a very crowded event so I constantly needed to slow down and accelerate which consumes a lot of energy I could have saved. Another factor I didn't pay enough attention to was that the course is mostly flat but has a few hills. I didn't take them into account in my pacing strategy so I went hard on them. I passed the 5 mile mark with a few seconds faster than my goal time but I knew I burnt a few matches due to all the zizaging and waste of energy. The last bit of the course is a long tunnel where my GPS watch wasn't working anymore so I had no information about my pace. I knew after the tunnel and the famous light at the end of the tunnel I would have 2 km left so I decided to spare energy. Unfortunately, I slowed down too much and once out of the tunnel I saw I was late based on my target pace and I couldn't make up the time I lost. I crossed the finish line in 1h17, so still way faster than my 1h43 three years ago but without reaching my objective.

Unlike the 5 km and the 10 km race, I was a bit disappointed because due to things out of my control I didn't have the feeling that I ran my potential. I didn't have much time to complain as the 20 km of Brussels was just a month from that race.

20K

While reflecting on my 10 miles race, I noticed I didn't include many long runs in my training sessions. I was disappointed I didn't express my full potential in that race and I wanted to put all the cards in my favour for the 20km of Brussels. Before the 10 miles I planned to run a sub 1h40 and I didn't change this goal as I was confident in my abilities. An important change in my training is that the 20 km of Brussels is very hilly and I knew from experience you had to

train for it so I did all my long runs on a hilly self-made course. A few days from the race I felt very good and deeply confident I would run the sub 1h40.

For my second official race, I managed to convince the two friends who ran the marathon with me to join me for this race. On race day we spent a while waiting in our starting lane on the grass, ready to run, and positioned ourselves at the front to avoid the crowd. My friends started out too fast at the beginning on the hills and I slowed them down as I had my own pacing plan to tackle the hills. The point is to consume the same amount of energy on the uphill, downhill and the flats which means that I'm a bit slower on the hills and a bit faster on the downhills. Pacing and nutrition were going perfectly according to plan and I was happy the race was less crowded than the previous one. To give us extra motivation we quite naturally started to check each other's hand at each kilometre if we were on pace which was always the case. In the beginning of the race we had to run a long road facing the Palace of Justice and at that moment my friend got a call. With my best friend we were looking at them and wondering who takes a call during a race. And it wasn't the only funny thing. Later in the race their sibling showed up to encourage us and I was surprised they saw us in the middle of so many runners and that they knew at what time exactly we would be there. At about 5 km the calling friend felt our pace was too fast and told us we could go ahead. I was left with my best friend exactly like three years earlier. The 20 km of Brussels race is a very nice one going through a small wood and main roads and I was fully enjoying revisiting the city I was born in. As we approached the 16 km mark and the infamous *avenue de Tervuren* I started to accelerate and my best friend asked me why I was trying to leave them behind. I told them it was part of my pacing strategy, the avenue de Tervuren is extremely hilly and I know for sure I'll lose time there and I am confident I have enough energy to make up that time now. When we arrived at the foot of the hill I told them that's where the race actually starts. They couldn't keep up and I accelerated. This was the exact opposite of what happened three years ago where I couldn't follow them. I accelerated a lot on the avenue and went even faster for the last 2 km. At that moment I was proud of myself as it took me three years and two failures to finally beat that avenue. I felt strong, confident and in the best shape ever. I couldn't even sprint as fast as I wanted because there were a lot of people near the end. I crossed the finish line in 1h38, so again way faster than my 1h59 from the first time I completed that race.

MARATHON

I took a complete week off after the 20 km race and a few lighter weeks before starting a three month training block for the marathon. For all the previous races, I focused on a balanced lifestyle and trained 2 times a week but I knew that would not be enough for a marathon. I planned to train on average 3 times a week as training volume becomes paramount for such a long race. All my previous training plans were self made based on my experience but in order to run a marathon fully I had to do it right and I found a very well rounded online training plan tailored to my 20 km PB. It estimated I could run the marathon in 3h41. I took some margin and decided to aim for something between 3h45 and 4h. I knew this time sub 4h was very realistic unlike three years ago. When I was in ironman shape I was for sure able to run a sub 4h marathon so I knew I was on the safe side. But something inside me was not having it. My 20 km had been a successful race and for that reason I thought it would be too good to have two successful races in a row. My guts were feeling the marathon won't necessarily be a success but I shut those feelings down and focused on my training.

The training went very well and I trained a lot on hills during the long training runs. I also felt confident about the goal pace. The more training sessions I was completing, the more confident I was about a successful marathon. Even though I was running the same marathon as before, they changed the course. I meant no *avenue de Tervuren* which I was happy about. I was still worried about the elevation gains but the course was a bit flatter but still hilly so I made sure to do my long runs on very steep hills. A new addition was the finish in the Baudouin stadium. During taper week I felt weirdly a bit sluggish but I knew it was normal and that I would be ready on D-Day. But that didn't prevent me from experiencing stress and anxiety the days leading to the race. I also took a full week of focus where I isolated myself a bit from social activities and texting people, read motivating biographies and watched tons of motivational videos. I watched

one in particular on repeat where it says: "You don't run a marathon for miles 1 to 18. Miles 1 to 18 is just to get you to the last 8 miles. That's where you're tested. There will be a point, where it gets hard, and the question you have to ask yourself is 'How are you going to act? How are you going to respond when it gets hard?'" That stuck with me and I was listening to it on repeat.

I did a shake out run two days before the race and my heart rate was strangely high. Even though I was worried, I tried to rationalise it and told myself it would just go away. The day before the race I went to get my race bib and spend some time at the finish line doing some visualisation practice. I paused and looked around me, imagining the stadium full of people cheering while I was crossing the finish line.

And there I was, the evening right before the race, having a casual chat with my mum. And then suddenly, a strong feeling ran through my body. I just couldn't hold it and immediately expressed it. Out of nowhere, I interrupted my mother and bluntly told her that I just absolutely do not want to run an effing 42.195 km the next day. I spent some time complaining that I just couldn't get bothered but I also knew deep down that would run it anyway. I also took a look at the weather forecast and saw I would not only have to run a freaking marathon but also under the rain...

5 am, D-Day, I am not really motivated but I managed to get myself excited with music and motivational videos. On my way to the starting line, I met someone who had the same target time as me and wanted to do a full distance triathlon later on. I did a warm-up with them and I saw that my heart rate issues weren't solved and I started being very worried. I was running at my jogging pace with the heart rate of my marathon pace. I knew that wasn't good at all.

We positioned ourselves to the starting lane for a 3h45 marathon. When the gun went off I started running and while I let everyone pass me, I thought about what I was going to do about my heart rate issues. I hoped it would stabilise but after 3 km it wasn't the case and above all I was feeling sluggish and not really well. At that point I thought of my visualisation of the day before that wouldn't occur. I directly considered DNF (did not finish), thinking it would be a long day. I knew I could push but it did not seem worth it, I had nothing to prove. The 4h and 4h15 pacemakers rapidly passed me and I was in a constant mental battle on whether I should stop or keep on going. I was gutted. My training plan was on point, I had been consistent but I was just having a bad day and I did not want to run another marathon anytime soon. I thought again about the very reason I had set myself that goal. I wanted to run fully but my chances were drastically lowered due to factors outside of my control. While overthinking it, I saw a metro station and thought that maybe I should just let go and leave it there but I just kept running. I also tried to follow someone in a park with a similar pace at km 7 but seeing how unwell I was running at a jogging pace, the question was no more whether I will DNF or not but when.

The only thing that kept me going was that I was holding a slow but steady pace. At some point I saw the lead runners on the other side of the road and all the runners started to applaud them. So to summarise, my heart rate was skyrocketing, I was feeling unwell, I was angry at life and to top it all there were less and less people around me. At km 9, a group of three people passed me and after an extra kilometre someone from that group started to slow down, telling their friend they could go without them. Luckily one of their friends went back to them and motivated them not to give up. I passed them at that moment so I didn't know what would happen to them and I was mostly focused on my own struggles. At that point I was holding my pace in discomfort and thought about my ironman strategy and applied the lessons I learnt meaning that I would consume as much energy as possible at each aid station. At 10 km I was already among the last people. I tried to hold on to certain peoples' paces and I would pass them, then they would pass me and so on. I remember at that point seeing people on the other side and thinking to myself I really wanted to stop so hard. I was so angry and pissed and gutted and just had to sit with the physical and emotional discomfort. But I kept going. And then, the people from the half marathon started joining us which meant I had to be more careful at aid stations as people were flying by. Thinking of my ironman strategy, I allowed myself to walk at aid stations if needed but I just didn't. After that, I was mostly running along the river but it was not exciting as I couldn't see the water from where we were running. While struggling, I started to hear

someone shouting behind me. It was the runner I saw earlier at km 10 with their friend. The struggling runner was now looking like a fighter and breathing at the sound of the chanting. This friend was motivating them and was chanting so loudly that I actually heard them almost from 1km away. Between the chanting they were also shouting '*Allez mon reuf* !'¹. They passed me around km 15 and I felt blessed to witness a true dedicated friend.

I passed the mid race after 2h09 and by then it was clear in my mind I would just try to finish this shit. I also thought that normally even if I hit the wall I can finish walking. I assumed I would slow down a lot later and maybe that 4h30 is a realistic target. I didn't care about making a time even worse than my first marathon, I just wanted to finish it decently. I just knew I had a maximum of 5 hours so in the worst case scenario, walking was still an option. I also saw the friend I made before the race twice and they were walking and on the other side so behind me in the race. I didn't realise I passed them actually. I encouraged them and told them they would make it but they told me it was over. I later learnt that they were injured and DNF.

Around km 22, I passed the chanting runner with their friend, this time feeling like giving up and never saw them again until after the end of the race where the chanting runner crossed the finish line alone. This part of the race was also along the river but this time with the view on the water. The only problem was that it was a boring straight line. From km 23 on, I started passing people whereas before everyone was passing me and mainly people above 50 years young, which hurt my ego a bit. I slowed down a bit between km 23 to 26 and while glancing at the river, I reminded myself that I am an effing Ironman and I had already finished a marathon before. This is nothing compared to what I have done and I can make it to the end. I remember trying to follow someone. I felt like they were running too fast but in the end managed to pass them. At km 26 I made a U-turn and I was running head wind for a long straight line until km 29. It's at that time that I started noticing people walking. And then something happened. The beginning of my race I was feeling unwell, full of anger and the only thing on my mind was when is the best moment to stop. After the midmark, I started to feel slightly better but approaching km 30 and the infamous marathon wall, I just felt amazing. I did not expect it at all and soaked up the moment. I was running headwind, confident and right before my eyes there was a poster with the text "Break the wall". My immediate thought was, what wall are they talking about. I am feeling great and I won't experience it, it just doesn't exist. I remember a supporter on the side with a sign telling people to smile. Everyone else was suffering and I was the only one who looked at them with a big smile and they smiled back.

I was definitely pushing to maintain my pace but I was strong and not in agony like the other races. At that point there was a split between the marathon and half-marathon runners who directly had to take the climb but we had to run an extra 7 km with a turnaround. I saw the 3h45 pacemaker on the other side and realised the U-turn is still far away. I then started chatting with a fellow runner who told me they did several marathons. They told me this marathon felt like their very first one since they didn't race for three years because of the pandemic. A bit after this chat, I noticed I had a slight headache and took some electrolytes to prevent dehydration. I saw someone else and tried to hold their pace. I first couldn't, they moved further and further from me but then it clicked again, I passed them and felt only better from that moment on. Another runner had a *Marathon des Sables* shirt and while passing them I told them this marathon is nothing compared to what they did. As I was feeling strong and confident, I decided to motivate everyone who was walking and that gave me a boost in energy every single time. I got a bit excited though, and noticed my heart rate went a bit up so I slowed down. Of all the people I encouraged, only one was pissed at me. I told them there was only 8 km left, the final stretch but they did not like it as they were having a hard time. I remember someone else who was walking and they assured me that DNF wasn't an option. I was now done with the 7 km loop and ready for the big hill between km 37 and 39. This hill was a kind of replacement to the *avenue de Tervuren*. It was a bit less steep and shorter. I knew I was near the end but the time started to pass a bit slower but it did not change my mood. And passing someone disguised in a

¹ '*Reuf*' is a French slang term for '*frère*' which means brother. The whole sentence could be translated as 'Come on, bro!'

banana outfit also helps. I slowed down on the hill but not that much and passed even more people. At km 40 a runner complained that there were still little hills at the end which made me laugh a bit but I quickly got my focus back on finishing this race. At the last aid station, I took a banana and was ready for the last stretch. I was tired but again, I felt strong. I saw my friends right before entering the stadium which confused me a bit as I expected to see them while inside. And then I went to the Baudoin stadium and it was exactly like I had envisioned the day before. I started running faster, enjoyed the moment, felt strong, my friends went inside to cheer me up and I crossed the finish line with a time of 4h22.

CLOSING

After the race I reflected on the contrast between my two stand-alone marathons. At the end of the first one, time felt extremely long and I was complaining all the time. And three years later, I had a complete mindset shift, I felt strong in the effort to the point of encouraging the ones complaining.

Once again, I felt grateful for the amazing support system I have with friends who themselves suggested they come and see me while I didn't expect it or wouldn't have been angry if they didn't.

I also had the deep realisation that I actually always get what I subconsciously want. 'There will be a point, where it gets hard, and the question you have to ask yourself is how are you gonna act, how are you going to respond when it gets hard'. I expected it to be hard at km 30 and it's way easier to react to something hard when you know when it's going to happen. It was hard from the very first steps and I got the challenge I actually asked for. Once again I did my best and my best based on the conditions of the day was better than I thought.

I used to think that mental strength was about being strong and confident in all sorts of situations. Now I know that it's when you are feeling miserable, hating every second of what you are doing, but you are still doing it. It's about not letting all the external and internal factors change the actions you set out to do. Doing something when you feel strong and confident is easy. But doing something when it is the last thing you want to do is where true mental strength lies. No matter how much you are complaining or suffering, out loud or in your mind, the mere fact you keep moving shows your character.

I didn't achieve my time goal but I did achieve my main goal to run a marathon fully. Even with the difficulty, I never walked and held a steady pace during the whole race. I knew it was time to close the endurance chapter of my life and I also knew one day, I'll open it anew. But in the meantime, my next goal was [running faster](#).