

## **To Sub-3 or not Sub-3, That is the Question.**

If somebody had mentioned the words "sub-3 marathon" a few years back, in my ignorance, that wouldn't really have registered as anything too impressive, but apparently this number is kind of a big deal in running circles. For, back in those days, I was still playing soccer, had little knowledge of running and had only just begun to dip my toes into the world of 5 ks and 10 ks. Fast-forward to May 2025 and sub-3 is the only thing on my mind whenever I lace up my runners for a session.

### **January**

2025 had not started in the best of fashions. A bout of flu (actual flu, not the "man" variety) had struck the household and, just after that had cleared, Storm Éowyn visited our shores, meaning that January was as good as a write-off. A grand total of 80 kilometres for the month does not a sub-3 marathon make!

### **February**

Patience is a virtue, they say, but something that was in short supply in early February. A quick scan of my training schedule shows a steep increase in mileage, when gradual increments might have been a more sensible approach: 30 km to 45 km to 60 km to 65 km to 87 km, back down to 72 km before the body was starting to cry enough. A quick trip to the physio for a full rub-down and we were good to go again!

### **March**

Training had been going better than expected. The addition of two 20-minute S&C (strength and conditioning) sessions a week was a non-negotiable if I wanted to make gains. I had wanted to add back-to-back long runs at weekends, but other commitments made that impossible. Instead, alongside the mandatory Saturday long run, I compromised on a near weekly 20 km run up and down the hills of Ryehill and its environs on a Monday morning/afternoon. That was a game-changer as I could feel the strength building in my legs as the weeks went by. It was at this point that the seed of a sub-3 attempt had been planted. I thought it was physically possible and many club colleagues had plenty of faith in me, but I didn't want to shout it from the rooftops and tempt fate. In fact, I would have much preferred to keep everything on the lowdown and then shock the world (well, maybe not) with a sub-3 at the Cork City Marathon on the June Bank Holiday weekend. However, in the world of Strava, people can see your form and very easily put two and two together. The doubts were there. My mileage was on the low end for a sub-3 attempt and I wondered if maybe I was simply better suited to the shorter distances anyway. I had already done four steady if unspectacular marathons previously, starting with a respectable 3:25 in Cork in 2022 and most recently setting a PB of 3:22 at the same venue in 2024. The word "plateau" comes to mind. To make up for this perceived lack of mileage, I needed the confidence booster of setting significant PBs over 5 k, 10 k and half marathon over the coming weeks and months so that I could tick a few boxes in advance of Cork.

### **Test 1: Ennis 10 k – March 22<sup>nd</sup>**

I set my previous PB over 10 k in Moylough in 2022 (38:56) and needed to find a good minute to be on pace for a sub-3 in June (at least in my head). I went through the first half in 19:15 so wasn't too optimistic as we turned left back into Ennis town. However, a nice tailwind over the last 3 kilometres was exactly the push I needed and a final km of 3:31 saw me sneak under the 38-minute mark. Official chip time 37:56 – exactly one minute faster than Moylough and the first box ticked.

## **April**

Momentum continued to build into April and now my focus was on strong Saturday long runs with increased sprinkles of marathon pace thrown in. All in all, I did five long runs of 20 to 22 miles during this training block, all with the mantra “finish strong” – in other words, I tried to make sure that my last five or so kilometres were at or close to marathon pace (4:15/km in my case). This I felt was key in terms of visualisation, namely to get myself mentally prepared for the inevitable pain that comes with the last 20% of a marathon. The end of April saw the start of the 5 k series – an event I’d never heard of before I took up running, but now a firm favourite of mine. The goal here was to go sub-18. My previous best was an 18:35 in Maree last year, so a big leap was needed.

### **Test 2: Craughwell – Round 1 of 5 k Series – April 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Even wild horses couldn’t stop a nice PB on this particular evening – and I mean that quite literally. About two kilometres in, just as the lactic acid was beginning to build, the sound of horse hooves approaching from behind grew louder and closer, and soon our new equine acquaintances were alongside and past us. Shouts of “keep right” helped ensure that nobody got hurt, but not the sight you want to see as you cough and splutter your way down a narrow country lane. Anyway, a bit of distraction on my way to a surprising 17:40 finishing time, a PB by almost a minute and a real confidence booster. Box number two ticked.

### **May / Test 3: Limerick Half Marathon – May 4<sup>th</sup>**

The bulk of my training was now behind me. I just had the small matter of the Limerick Half in early May to contend with. The body was feeling good and the mind was focused. So much so that I seriously contemplated switching from the half to the full down Shannon-side to get this 3-hour monkey off my back! However, common sense soon prevailed and I decided to stick to the original plan. Here I needed to be under or around the 1 hr 25 minute-mark to have any hope of a sub-3 in Cork in a month’s time. Of all the PB attempts thus far, this was easily the most intimidating. The idea of stringing together 21 kilometres in a row at 4 min/km pace seemed a stretch – I still associated that kind of speed with a very respectable 5 k result. Only now I needed to do four fast 5 ks in succession, and then some! The race went exactly to plan, if not even better, and by the time I passed Tony, who was generously handing out Lucozade Sport around 13/14 kilometres in, I knew I’d be under 1:25. The question then was, “could I get under 1:24?”, and after some quick calculations, as we entered the final mile, I realised that with a really strong finish I might even sneak under 1:23. Chip time: 1 hr 22 minutes and 56 seconds. Box number three ticked and now my mind was clear – it would be sub-3 or bust come the June Bank Holiday weekend!

The rest of the month was pretty low key – one last 36 km long run at a decent pace the following week, a half marathon up and down the Salthill Prom at marathon pace during the warm spell and then into taper mode.

### **Cork City Marathon – June 1<sup>st</sup>**

The morning finally arrived, but not without some drama beforehand. The race kicked off at 8:15 on Sunday morning and I was due to be collected from my hotel by a friend at 7:30. But with all the road closures on race day, he found himself stuck in traffic and couldn’t guarantee that he’d be there on time. It was 7:25 and time was ticking. I had to bolt it or at least walk briskly/jog to the start line about 3.5 kilometres away. I’d get there on time but how much energy would I have expended and what about the bag drop? In a panic I decide to hitch-hike and thankfully didn’t have to wait too long

before being picked up – a fellow runner spotted my sparkling new Alphaflys and understood my dilemma.

Crisis averted and bag dropped, I made my way onto Patrick's Street with nine (yes nine) gels packed into my Underarmours – one before, two in hand and six stuffed into my right pocket – and looked around for those yellow balloons with "3:00" scribbled on them. Pacers located, the plan was simple: keep a reasonable distance behind, but keep them in sight, try to make everything feel as easy and relaxed as possible for as long as possible. And for the most part, everything went to plan. In my head, kilometres 30 to 35 would make or break my marathon. It's the steepest part of the course, just when you want things to be easy, but I felt if I could get through this part unscathed, then the magic sub-3 would be on. And so it proved.



My calves hated every second on those sneaky uphill sections around "The Lough", twitching and straining and borderline seizing. It was at this point that I got stuck on 4:19/km pace for what seemed like an eternity – good but not good enough if I were to reach my goal. As we entered the "Carrigrohane Straight" I was never so relieved to see a flat stretch of road and soon 4:19/km became 4:15/km and the sub-3 was back on again. "Just get to 40 km and you'll be fine" I kept repeating to myself. "Ok, now give me one more km at that speed and you'll hear the crowds". Not only was the cheering of the crowds becoming more audible, but one of the 3-hour pacers had slowed down and picked me up. "Get me the "\*\*\*\*" home" I implored politely as we made our way

down the cobblestones of North Main Street. He calmly assured me that this pace would be good enough and to just keep it steady. And he was right. As we turned left from Washington Street onto Patrick Street, the finish line slowly came into sight and with it the numbers I had been craving. First a “2”, then a “5”, followed by a “9” and with the seconds on the low end, finally in those last few metres I could relax and savour the moment of an official chip time of 2:59:22. It had been a long old slog over a four-month period and thankfully something I’ll never have to do again. Roll on Dublin in October where I might finally be able to fully enjoy a marathon for once.