

# A Tale of 3 Marathons: My 12 month journey from Coma to PB



## *Marathon 1*

*London Marathon (28 Apr 2019)*

*Result: Did Not Finish (DNF)*

## *Marathon 2*

*Loch Rannoch Marathon (13 Oct 2019) Result: 2:54:18*

## *Marathon 3*

*"Virtual" Meadows Marathon (26 Apr 2020) Result: 2:48:41*

The finishing times of the 3 marathons I ran between April 2019 and April 2020 don't look particularly interesting in isolation - failed a tough challenge at the first time of asking, before going on to complete it next time and then do slightly better the time after that.

**Pretty typical right? Not really in my case...**

The DNF attached to my initial attempt in London 2019 came in dramatic fashion, after an unexpected cardiac arrest stopped me in my tracks with only

500 metres to go. A grimmer ending than I'd ever have imagined when setting off that day.

In contrast, the endorphin release I got from reading the 2 words "Fastest Marathon" on my watch in 2020 was more powerful than any other I've ever experienced and marked the end of a rollercoaster 12 months in between the two races.

Any personal best times I've recorded have given some form of "Runner's High", but the comeback element of this one made it particularly special. This is the story of the journey between the two events.

### ***A DNF at London: April 28th 2019***

Growing up watching the London marathon on tv was always an annual highlight. I loved seeing the large cheering crowds, willing on the athletes at every stage of the race, and felt inspired by the back stories of the runners taking part on the day.

I had completed several half marathons and 10k races in previous years to help secure an entry via my running club, Edinburgh Athletic Club, for the 2019 London Marathon - my first competitive attempt at this distance.

I felt excited as I lined up amongst the 1000s of other runners at Greenwich Park that day, eager to add my name to the illustrious list of those who have completed 26.2 miles around the capital in the UK's most famous race.

A digital snapshot of the first 26 miles of the race looks great – I'd reached Buckingham Palace (500 metres from the end) after about 2hrs 50mins and was well on course to finish comfortably under 3 hours.

I wish I could give a detailed account of what happened at this point, but I can't. I don't remember any of the race.

All I know for certain is that things suddenly took a turn for the worse at this point. My heart stopped beating and I crashed to the floor in an instant, ending my race there and then.

A team of paramedics promptly arrived to perform emergency CPR at the side of the road, before an ambulance took me to St Thomas hospital where I'd spend the night in an induced coma. A horrible ending to the day, with the

three dreaded letters “DNF” attached to my name in the results list an added insult to injury to show the world I’d failed to make it to the end.

### *Post London Recovery: April – May 2019*



I have no memory of waking up in St Thomas, but I’m reliably told my first post coma conversation was food related and went something along the lines of;

Mum: Are you wanting something to eat?

Me: Yeah, I’d love some sushi.

Dad: Great I’ll go get you some.

***\*Dad gets sushi, I eat sushi, nurse disposes of waste\****

Mum: Was that sushi good?

Me: What sushi?

Short term memory isn’t top of the body’s priority list when it’s rebooting itself, so the initial challenges of my marathon recovery largely involved trying to remember what I’d eaten for dinner or watched on tv earlier in the day!

With the support of the medical staff at the hospital, along with my family and friends who were at my side, I recovered from the initial trauma after a few days and was allowed home with my parents to begin the next stage of the recuperation process.



The usual post marathon trials and tribulations of hobbling around on aching muscles are bad enough. Added to that a nasty fall, CPR and emergency medical treatment meant I found myself with a body which was literally sore to move in any way possible.

My brain was at least fully active by this point, so I was keen to start understanding what had gone wrong. The medical records given to me when I left the hospital were a good start;

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS  
NHS Foundation Trust  
Telephone: 020 7188 7188

INPATIENT DISCHARGE LETTER

|                                   |                           |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Ward: Intensive Care Unit 1-STH   | Hospital Number: 2801581H |
| Consultant: O'Hara, Geraldine     | NHS Number:               |
| Specialty: 30081-General Medicine | Surname: SIMPSON          |
| Date of Admission: 28/04/2019     | Forename: PETER           |
| Anticipated Discharge on:         | DOB: 01/07/1986 Age: 32y  |
| Name and Address of GP:           | Sex: Male                 |
| NOT REGISTERED                    | Address:                  |
| NO REGISTERED PRACTICE            | UNK                       |
|                                   | NK                        |
|                                   | ZZ99 3VZ                  |

Drug Allergy / Significant Adverse Reaction

| Type       | Allergen / Intolerant to | Reaction | Description |
|------------|--------------------------|----------|-------------|
| None Known | None Known               | N/A      |             |

Presenting Complaints

|   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | No Presenting Complaints Entered |
|---|----------------------------------|

Principal Diagnosis

|   |                                |                          |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | No Principal Diagnosis Entered | Comorbidities            |
|   |                                | No Comorbidities Entered |

Surgery / Other Procedures

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | No Surgery and Other Procedures Entered |
|---|---|

Clinical Summary

Mr Simpson is a 32 year old gentleman admitted to ITU at GSTT following an out of hospital cardiac arrest on 28/4/2019

History of events:

28/4/19  
Mr Simpson was running the London Marathon where he collapsed approximately 500m prior to the finish line. Paramedics were able to reach him where his pulse was not palpable and his GCS was noted 3/15. CPR was commenced and 2 cycles were performed. It is unclear if there was definite loss of output.

Patient was sedated and intubated for transfer to cath lab.  
CT showed normal coronaries.  
Bedside echo revealed:

- Globally impaired LV and RV function
- LVEF est 20-25%
- No clear RWMA
- No AR
- Trivial MR
- Mild TR - no reliable TR jet
- Small effusion - not of haemodynamic significance

29/4/19  
Extubated  
Repeat echo: EF 60-65%, Small PFO/ASD with L->R shunt.

After extubation, Mr Simpson has made good progress on the unit. He is now mobilising well, eating and drinking, does not

Printed by: Harper, Jennifer (Pharmacist)  
at: 01/05/2019 11:43  
Version: 0

Visit Number: IP93657146

A line in the middle of the first page initially grabbed my attention;

***"...his pulse was not palpable and his GCS was noted as 3/15".***

Consulting Doctor Google to translate this in to my native Scottish tongue I loosely worked it out to be;

***"...his heart wasn't beating, we couldn't find any sign of life and his Glasgow Coma Scale was 3 out of 15".***

And what is the Glasgow Coma Scale?



***“The Glasgow Coma Scale is used to give a reliable way of recording a person’s level of consciousness”***

A score of 3 out of 15 doesn’t look great although it could be worse, right?

***“The scale goes from 3 to 15, with a low score of 3 given if the person cannot open their eyes, makes no sound and cannot move.***

***In a review of 111 patients with a GCS score of 3 the death rate was found to be 89%, 7% survived in a vegetative state and 4% recorded satisfactory survival”***

Turns out it can’t be worse!

It could be argued that the data wasn’t credible as the sample size is too small and as a fit club runner I probably didn’t fit the mould of the 111 patients in it. Nonetheless, seeing words of that severity linked to my name was a shock and difficult to comprehend – it really brought home how lucky I’d been to make it out of London at all that day.

***A Return to Running: June 2019***



Once the initial recovery was done the next step involved an assortment of medical scans and blood tests to figure out what had happened. Arranging these gave a clear path to follow and would hopefully provide answers to a lot of the immediate questions in my head:

***How did this happen?***

***Could it happen again?***

***Will I be able to do my job?***

***Will I be able to run again?***

To non-runners the last question might seem bonkers. Why would you want to get back doing the very thing which almost killed you only a few weeks earlier?

For me, running offers much more than the obvious fitness benefits. Being part of a wider community chasing a common goal helps create a strong social network, while also providing personal satisfaction of pushing yourself to keep improving each day.

Coping with day to day life would be much more of a struggle without it and thankfully the consultant treating me took the same view. He empathised with the benefit it would give to the mental side of the recovery and helped set out a series of targets to work towards over the next few weeks;

***Easy jogging***

***50% Easy Jogging / 50% Steady Running***

***Steady Running***

***Steady Running with a quicker mile in the middle***

Tackling those one at a time gave manageable milestones for me to work towards and it felt great hitting each one before moving on to the next. I could feel progress being made and felt ready to take things to the next level.

### ***Planning the Comeback: July 2019***

It took months, but following scan after scan and test after test they finally found that the cardiac arrest I'd suffered was most likely driven by a severe iron deficiency.

My levels were very low, confirming that I was anaemic and wasn't producing enough healthy red blood cells to carry adequate oxygen around my body's tissues. As the flow of the oxygen starts to run out, the body starts to shut down bit by bit until the most essential function (i.e. the heart) stops too.

Fortunately the problem can be safely managed by chugging down a few iron tablets a day. With a new lease of life, I could start training again and quickly set a new series of targets;

***Paisley 10k => Do it in about 38 minutes***

***Reykjavik Half Marathon => Have fun doing the distance***

***Stirling 10k => 6 minutes per mile pace (37:20ish)***

***Scottish Half Marathon => Quicker than Reykjavik***

***Glasgow Great Scottish 10k => Quicker than Stirling***

***Loch Rannoch Marathon => Finish the race!!***

This racing season would be different to most, but I had a path towards ridding the "DNF" attached as the marathon best against my name and felt empowered to give it my best shot.



## *Making the Distance: August – October 2019*



Pictures speak louder than words, and the smiley photos at the end of the races planned in advance of my second marathon attempt hopefully show they went well.

I'd never been to Loch Rannoch before and had no real connection to it, so it might seem a random choice for my marathon comeback.

When choosing a venue the low key environment, less intense than big city races, was a strong appeal. The glorious scenery which greeted me on arrival immediately confirmed the choice was a good one.





On the morning of the race I woke up relatively calm and dare I say excited about the prospect of running a lap of the loch to complete my first marathon. Training had gone well, each race before had gone to plan and I felt confident a better result was going to come my way that day.

When the race got underway I joined a group of runners towards the front, noting a guy from Fife Athletic Club murmur something about 3-hour pace. When things settled down I decided to tuck behind him in to 7th and strap myself in for whatever would follow.





Staying just behind another runner for the first hour helped manage the initial nerves. It also provided a vehicle to keep my mind ticking over by picking out landmarks to regularly check on the gap between us.

Eventually we arrived at a drink stand at the same time after 10 miles, following which I decided to crack on and see if I could keep up with the runners further ahead.



The ability to stay “sensible” in the racing environment became increasingly hard to keep in check. After working my way past the runner in 5th place a crossover point around halfway showed that I was quite close to the leading pack – the race was on!!

The course was quite twisty-turny, which made it hard to work out how far behind the runner in front of me was. To try and get a better idea I asked an elderly spectator if he knew, only to initially be more confused by the estimate he hesitantly threw back at me;

***“I think about 400 yards maybe.”***

As a metric runner the old money measurement was puzzling enough, but how on earth could he possibly have worked out a distance between two moving objects!?

The randomness did at least give the brain something to think about. A yard is slightly shorter than a meter, a running track is 400 meters, I takes me about

90 seconds to do a lap of a track so I must be about a minute and a half behind 4th place!

When the course straightened out it turned out he was correct, and as an added bonus the runner in 3rd place was side by side with the guy in 4th. A podium place was now well within my sights.

Despite there being plenty of the race left common sense went out the window and I chased them down to find myself in the “bronze medal” position as we moved towards the business end of the race.



The runner in 2nd was never in sight, but there was plenty of company towards the end from runners taking part in a half marathon which shared the same finish.

With their words of encouragement helping power the legs for the final push I can remember coming back in towards the village almost frame by frame, feeling in control as my watch hit 42 kilometres and I neared the end of the race (a marathon is 42.2k for a metric runner like me).

At this point I knew I was going to do it. Those words boomed loudly through my head as edged towards the finish line;

**“You’re going to do it.”**

I’m not usually an emotional guy, but tears started to drip out my eyes as I hit the home stretch with the sentence being broadcast on repeat in my head. I’d crossed the line and the journey was over – finally I could call myself a marathon runner, and a bronze medal one at that.



### ***A Sense of Unfinished Business: November – December 2019***

The immediate aftermath following Loch Rannoch was great. Every message of congratulations hit a positive note, but I didn't quite feel like the comeback from London Marathon was complete just yet. I still had an urge to complete the big one itself in a time which matched the potential I had.

Thankfully being part of a great running club like Edinburgh AC makes this more accessible than would otherwise be the case. After speaking to my coaches another crack at London in 2020 was agreed as the next target.

As an added bonus I would also get a shiny new vest to wear for the event, replacing a tatty old grey one I'd had to use at Loch Rannoch and the other races as a substitute for a nice white one which didn't make it through the London ordeal.

The new vest was presented as a surprise gift by two of my running pals during our annual Christmas dinner, which was very touching and made me feel quite emotional.





It meant more than if I'd be given the most expensive hi-tech kit available on the market and I got home feeling happy and excited, knowing everything was now in place for taking on the challenges which lay ahead.

### ***Back to Training and Making Highlights: January – February 2020***

All the pictures you see of runners at the end of races look great. Delighted faces, medals and trophies proudly displayed to show off the achievement of having conquered a long term goal. The realities of Winter marathon training in Scotland paint quite a different picture at times.

Most of the early months of 2020 were spent getting battered about by Storm Ciara, Dennis and a bunch of other names I grew to dislike more and more as each long, cold and miserable run tested my love of the sport to the max.

Having a positive mindset is key to getting through these sessions and was aided in this training block by an idea my niece Beth had given me over Christmas.

She mentioned taking a note of her highlight of the day before going to bed each night, which sounded a great idea and was one I adopted as my New Year's Resolution for 2020.

The highlight log would often pop up in my head during sessions and the desire to have something good to record at the end of the day often helped squeeze out a little bit more. In particular a debate my inner dialogue was having about whether to add more weight on to my weekly set of squats left a mark:

Should I add more weight this week?

What if it goes wrong?

What if it's too heavy?

You don't have to do a full set.

Why not have a go?

**Okay, let's make a highlight!!**

The four simple words "let's make a highlight" were easy to remember, a positive motivator and became the mantra I used to regularly remind myself of the satisfaction steady improvement over would bring.

### ***A Change of Plan: March 2019***

Initially I wasn't worried about the noises being heard of a "Covid-19" virus from the East, which was causing large parts of China to be shut down. China was miles away and often had diseases which never really reached our shores so surely this would be the same?

We all know how that turned out and by the time the London Marathon was cancelled it had become so inevitable I didn't feel too down about it and tried to focus on what could be controlled.

A half marathon I'd entered from the village of Balloch on the shores of Loch Lomond, to the larger industrial town of Clydebank on the outskirts of Glasgow was still going ahead so I decided to put my immediate focus on that.

I stayed in Clydebank the night before the race and joined most of the other runners at a local leisure centre on the morning of the event to take one of the complementary shuttle buses to the start line at Balloch.

It was a dreich day, which matched the uneasy atmosphere on the bus as we all juggled a mix of emotion and fear, knowing something horrible was on its way and would likely make this the last race we were going to be able to run in quite some time.



I'd only ever run a half marathon under 80 minutes once before, in a time of 79:44, so beating that was the goal I set out to achieve. The field doing the race was quite large and I found myself in amongst a pretty big group aiming for about the same time as things got underway.

In contrast to the drama of the outside world the race felt calm and the early miles went by trouble free. Not much stood out until I passed the 10 mile point in 59:48, which was a big personal milestone thanks to the words of my Dad a few years ago.

When I started getting a bit more serious about my running he mentioned once doing a 10 mile race in under an hour. I could never have imagined running that fast for so long when starting out, but over the years it became more and more reachable and here I was doing it during a slightly longer race.

The support of my Dad, along with the rest of my close friends and family, had been instrumental in the recovery from London and looking back now I know he would have slipped in the 10 mile reference to help motivate me as my running improved.

I couldn't quite keep that pace going for the final 3.1 miles, but was still delighted when I crossed the line in 79:14 to beat the target I'd set. It felt good knowing that I would have at least one pb to show for my training over 2020 and the motivational wisdom of my Dad all those years ago helping me get there made it that little bit more special.



### ***Choosing My "Virtual" London Alternative: April 2020***

After the half marathon was done the next question was whether I would round off my marathon training programme within another shot at the distance. In truth there was only ever going to be one answer – of course I was!

The idea of failing to achieve my main goal for the second year in a row didn't sit well and I knew I wanted to get another completed 26.2 miles added to my name. The debate soon centered around where to do it and I eventually landed on the Meadows.





The Meadows is a 2.25 kilometre park in the middle of Edinburgh and every runner from the city knows it well. Doing lap after lap of it to complete a marathon might sound like a strange and boring choice, but it made a lot of sense the more I thought about it.

First and foremost it's completely flat, so very fast, and logistically it worked well too – it was close to where I lived, had paths wide enough to socially distance and offered a few places to set down bottles of water.

Although not the image I'd had at the start of the year I at least had a Plan B. Finally completing 26.2 miles in April in a time that did me justice was on and I was determined to get it done no matter what.

### ***Completing the Comeback: April 26th 2020***

My alarm went off at 6am on the day of the "race" and I got myself out of bed as soon as possible to get the fuel my body needed in the system. I was soon out of the door and found myself at the start line just after 7:30am, ready to go.





I set off with a view to beat my time from Loch Rannoch in 2019, which needed each kilometre to be run in about 4:07 minutes.

I hit the first one bang on target at 4:06, before competitive racing instincts kicked in and I settled in to a pace close to 4 minutes per kilometre as I got in to my stride.

I'd expected running lap after lap around a near empty park to be a bit of a grind, but I found I was enjoying it. My overriding feelings were ones of confidence and happiness as I took on the quest of laying the ghost of 2019 to rest once and for all.

Gradually a few people began appearing to share the journey with me. Giving imaginary nicknames and scenarios of what they were doing gave my mind something to think about as the laps were racked up and didn't play an insignificant role - part of me wishes I could thank "Backpack Lady", "Orange and Dog", "Dally Duo", "Spanish Orange", "Argentina", "Newcastle" and "Big Rugby" for the helping me on my way that day.





I wish something memorable had happened towards the end of the run, but there wasn't anything too exciting. I didn't really hit the dreaded "marathon wall" at the 24-25 mile mark and kept going at a steady pace as I completed the 18th and penultimate lap.

I rang an imaginary bell as I set out on lap 19 and felt great knowing I was just about there. The last full lap went by without any drama and I hit the home stretch knowing there was just a few hundred metres left to go.

Still fully aware of what was going on I knew there would be no repeat of the abrupt ending from 2019 and my watch hit 42.2k. Another marathon was complete, although I decided to keep going until 42.25km to make sure no satellite issues would rob me of the glory!

With a sufficient cushion in place the journey was over and I hit stop - immediately sharing the excitement of my watch which was eager to tell me I had "1 new record"! Delight was flowing through me as "Fastest Marathon 2:48:41!!" was then flashed in my face.



After getting some water and food on board, I got ready to walk home and pulled out my phone to let my friends and family know it was done. I'd finally completed 26.2 miles on London marathon weekend in a time which reflected my ability and couldn't have felt happier at that moment.

The well wishes started to come through straightaway and each made me feel more and more emotional as I walked home. I sobbed with satisfaction most of the way back feeling a pretty proud man, knowing the marathon journey I'd started out on 12 months ago had finally reached the ending I'd wanted.



*Pete Simpson*