

Chasing Big Bird, by J. C. Hall

‘You’ve been overtaken by Big Bird!’ My dad knew it would be all the motivation I needed to forget about the cramps and the swimming head and get running again.

‘I’ll beat him even if it kills me! See you in The Mall.’ was my reply. Being a 17 stone prop forward deciding to run the London Marathon was a stupid decision on my part. I have been told I have arms the size of a distance runners legs, looking around me at the start this seemed to be accurate.

The moment the magazine dropped in the mailbox with the term ‘Congratulations, you’ve got a place...’ I knew I was in for a long winter. I had trained well, or as well as I could, and felt nervous yet confident as the day approached.

Staying with friends the night before listening to songs like ‘Keep on Running’ and ‘Ain’t no Stopping us Now’ was meant to help motivate me. As soon as I hear one of those tracks I’m in London, cramping up and hating large yellow birds.

I was at 22 miles when Big Bird went past, near Wapping, my legs failed me and I have never felt so exhausted or so determined. I met some family members and was relieved to see familiar faces. Some food and water were taken on, and then I waited for a couple of minutes and stretched the muscles. I was ready to start running again. Big Bird now had a head start.

After a few minutes I had made up enough time to see my nemesis and motivation. Going past 24 miles I had closed the gap to about a minute. It felt like an hour.

Cleopatra’s Needle was the next landmark and when I got there I knew I would get past him, the gap was closing quite quickly and I was getting a second wind, or was it a 20th wind by now? Parliament Square next, 1 mile to go and there was Big Bird, only about 10 yards in front. I overtook him in, ironically, Birdcage Walk. Knowing at this point finishing was a near certainty I started to relax and found I was running quite freely.

At the finish line I looked behind me and saw Big Bird about to cross the line. I had a chat with him and he was a sub 3 hour Marathon runner who fancied a challenge. A certifiable madman in my reckoning, isn’t 26.2 miles challenging enough? It also turned out he had started 20 minutes before me! That’s a real head start.

Whilst I had been running my parents had decided that they had plenty of time to get to The Mall and they had arrived after I finished. They couldn’t beat Big Bird or me using the Underground.

I was told the first time you finish a Marathon the experience is brilliant. They were right and now having completed five I can say it doesn’t change. My dad still says that the only reason I finished was because I couldn’t stand the thought of being beaten by Big Bird. I know I would have finished anyway because the decision had been made to run. I haven’t told him that. (Until he reads this!)