

By Jose Lopez

For those of you that have always raced in the States, I want to share the experience that I had recently. Last week as some of you know I was in Puerto Vallarta (PV), Mexico. As the San Francisco Marathon is vastly approaching (July 26), my miles are being cut as I begin to taper and focus on the big race. So, going to Puerto Vallarta and chillin' at the beach sounded like a great idea. Actually it was a blast. I would highly recommend and if anyone is planning on going, let me know so that I can recommend some really nice beaches and the best seafood out there (for those of you that don't know I tend to eat quite a bit).

My mom recently turned 50 and as her gift, I planned a week-long vacation. She has a sister, and my aunt is staying in PV, so it was real convenient. We went to about five different beaches where I got to run on the sand. For those of you who haven't had the pleasure of running on the sand, let me tell you it is one of the toughest things out there. My usually pace is about 7-8 minute miles. I was going about 10-12 minute pace in the sand. The whole foot sinks down as soon as you hit the ground and pulling it back up feels like you have five pounds on your feet. But then again you can't beat the scenery, so I can't complain.

The race was scheduled for Sunday, the day before we were heading back to Dallas. I found out about it because one night we went to a real nice Cuban restaurant and listened to a great band sing some Tito Puente and Celia Cruz (definitely worth listening to). Well, it got late and as we were driving back we noticed a huge billboard that read athletic race La Tortuga. So, we stopped and read all about it. Originally, it was a 10K race and was organized by the athletic council of Puerto Vallarta Jalisco. So, the next day or the same day actually since it was about 2 a.m. on Saturday when we saw the billboard, we went and signed up. Surprisingly, the race was free. All I had to do was put my information on a piece of paper and they gave me my number and told me they would give me some pins the next day.

Race time came Sunday morning. Race was at 8, but I arrived around 7. Was still half asleep when I arrived, so I basically waited around for about half an hour until I finally decided to start warming up. Started warming up at the track. The track was a synthetic track, but it was really hard -- not like the tracks here in the States where you can feel the cushion. The track was originally red, much like many HS tracks around here. Yet, with so much use, most of the lanes were black. Also, unlike here in the States in was the only track in the city, and there are only a handful in the whole country. Nevertheless, the track served its purpose, so I can't complain.

As I was warming up, runners started arriving and I was very surprised that I saw only males with the race numbers attached. There were women there, but were mainly walking or accompanying their significant other. After warming up for 20 minutes or so, I found out that the race, because of logistics and traffic control, was changed from a 10K to a 5K. It was on the main road of PV and I guess they did not have enough cops. So, I figured no big deal; I'll just go out a little faster. The street was being closed off by the

police, and the race started at the track and went for 2.5K to a Holiday Inn, where runners turn around and head back to the track (reminded me of the DRC races). The course was slightly downhill going and uphill coming. Also, the street wasn't concrete; it was squared rocks and, because of the transportation that passes by daily, it was slightly uneven. Also, I counted about 8-10 women. Most of the participants were in soccer shoes or cross trainers. Only a few participants actually had running shoes. I can't imagine running in cross trainers, which looked pretty worn out to begin with. So, the gun sounded and a couple of what appeared to be high school kids take off real fast and I go right behind them. After about 400 meters, they begin to slow down and I pass them. Suddenly, I find myself in first place, chasing the police truck that is the leading pace car. There is another runner on my tail. Because I was feeling good at the time, I decided to push the pace and the guy drops back a little. Also, a bunch of cars and buses, which provide public transportation, start honking real loud, especially the buses. People on the street and in cars start yelling, which made it real entertaining for me. I even saw people in the balcony of hotels start shouting. All the honking and shouting made me keet pushing the pace. I finally saw the Holiday Inn and saw the turnaround mark. There were no mile or kilometer markers, so I just went by street light. There was a light every 400 meters or so. At the turn around mark, a couple of people were offering bottled water. Didn't take any because I had to twist the cap open and maneuver myself to drink it, plus it was just a 5K so I didn't really need water.

As I was turning around, I saw a group of runners had formed a chase pack of about four or five, and they were about 10 meters behind. So, I had to step on the gas unless I wanted to be passed and I wasn't planning on being their rabbit. People kept shouting and honking. I even saw a person with a matraka (noise maker made out of wood), and the horns of those buses were real loud, so again I just kept pushing the pace and trying to get to the next light.

Finally I began to see the huge sign that said FINISH and it was hanging between two big palm trees. I began sprinting since I didn't want to be out-kicked at the end with about three lights to go. My legs were tired and my quads had started to burn. The temperature was in the 80s, but the humidity was real high because it rained that night. So, as you can imagine, my shirt and shorts were soaked; looked like I had been in the ocean. I kept pumping and finally hit the finish leaning forward because it was kind of short and I didn't want to hit my head on the sign. To my surprise and delight, my watch read 15:55. Wow! I thought. After the guy asked for my name at the finish line, he confirmed that I had run that time. My previous PR was 16:02 when I was 18, and I ran 16:04 in November, so I was real excited to have finally broken the 16-minute mark. At the finish, I took a bottled water and realized how much I was sweating. I definitely don't sweat like that in Dallas. I cooled down for a good 10 minutes this time and congratulated runners as they came in. The other guys in the chase group came in at around 16:10sh so they weren't far behind. And some of them weren't even in running shoes or running clothes, which made it impressive.

After the cool down, my family waited for the awards ceremony in which I was awarded a huge trophy almost 3 feet high and a medal. Some of the women divisions had one

person in the category. I had run a race in Mexico on the 31st of December in San Luis Potosi so I had run in a race before in Mexico, but I enjoyed seeing the different contrasts in the racing scene. Some of the biggest differences I saw between running in the States and Mexico is that in Mexico, they place more emphasis on just racing and not worrying about the accuracy of the course, whether or not they have a computerized chip timing or hydration. I didn't see one GU or fuel belt, and the crowd was amazing (you definitely don't hear all the honking and yelling in the States). Oh, and as Mark pointed out, the race wasn't USATF certified but my uncle did drive the course and it's odometer did read the correct distance, so I can count it as a new PR.

Run wild~Jose