

NEW COURSE RECORD AT THE PICHİ RICHİ MARATHON

by Ian Hill

Including a history of the Pichi Richi Marathon at the sharp end

John Csongei became the new course record holder for the Pichi Richi Marathon on Sunday 25th June 2017 when he smashed the 30-year old mark by nearly three minutes. In a brilliant display of self-control, John ran virtually even splits – unheard of for this course and contrary to conventional wisdom. He covered the hilly second half in a time which was only thirty-four seconds slower than the much easier first half. When I set the record in 1987, my second half was *six minutes* slower!

In any sport it is always tricky making comparisons with athletes from different eras and marathon running is no exception. However in this case we are talking about comparisons in the same *event* held thirty years apart. It is rare for the course to remain unchanged for so long but for the Pichi Richi Marathon that is the case, with only the start and finish moved slightly since 1987. The intervening forty-two kilometres is identical. John Csongei set a legitimate new *course* record.

I am in the unique position of having been a participant in the marathon on all three occasions a course record has been set. By definition the first record occurred at the first event by the then state marathon champion Steve Guy in 2:40:10. Steve won the state marathon at West Lakes a month earlier in 2:28:30 and had optimistically put 2:30 on his entry form for the inaugural Pichi Richi Marathon on 11th July 1982. Another competitor with a chance of winning was Peter Schultz who had run 2:32:39 at the Fanatics Marathon on Christmas Day the previous year. My PB going into the event was only 2:49:45 but that was due for a large revision after a 1:11:23 half marathon two months earlier. I had dropped out of the state marathon at 36km, exhausted by the sub 2:20 pace of the pack for the first 5km, and I was determined to make amends here.

In 1982 I took the lead along the causeway and felt comfortable but after Stirling the wind sprung up something shocking and it was very hard going. I consider it still the toughest weather conditions of those I've attended, including halves, but I did miss the stormy weather of 1990. At 30km I was informed by a spectator that I was "a long way ahead" but by 33km Steve caught me and simply said "it's windy isn't it" as he sailed by. Steve also told me that Peter had dropped out, so I knew I would place at worst second as I tried to keep up. In the end I finished in a PB of 2:43:05 and was happy with that, being within three minutes of the state champion.

On reflection I believe that had Steve had the same weather conditions in 1982 as I had in 1987 he would have run around 2:37. Conditions were much better in 2017 and he may have done 2:35. That's how good I consider his inaugural run was. Still, John Csongei would have run 2:34 in such a hypothetical race, with Steve, Peter and me hot on his heels!

Next year it was again a competitive race, with sub 2:30 marathoners Bob Barnard and by then Peter Schultz lining up with me, still at last year's 2:43:05 PB. One factor affecting all three of us was that we had no choice but to compete for our athletics clubs in the Gawler relays the previous afternoon, running a 5km leg as fast as we could. Peter and I ran just under 16 minutes and Bob would have been thirty seconds faster. At least we were all in the same boat, and it didn't seem to affect me at all. Conditions were much better than in 1982 and Bob ran an aggressive race to clock 2:40:44, ahead of Peter's 2:41:58 and my 2:43:16. Fourth was veteran Phil Afford in 3:00:12 who also ran at Gawler the previous afternoon.

After that event the consensus was that 2:35 was definitely possible for any of us. It would require a half way time of about 1:15 to counteract the *obvious* fact that the course itself has a built-in slowdown of about five minutes over the second half. The hills are not intrinsically steep – they just occur in the wrong place psychologically! The only way anyone could run an even or negative split was if they were foxing the first half! John Csongei was definitely not foxing! He just disregarded the consensus of thirty-something years earlier!

In 1984 Peter Schultz decided to enter at the last minute and ran the entire race in his warm-up tracksuit. No-one was too surprised though as Peter had become an accomplished ultra-marathoner, holding the Australian record for 100 miles and ultra runners needed such attire to keep going. His time was 2:43:32 and it was the first time the winner had run alone with runner up Phil Afford recording 2:57:12 at age 47. I was a spectator at that race, running the last 20 miles of the course earlier in the day in preparation for the Adelaide Marathon.

In 1985 the event was up for grabs as we all had a break from it and Frank Ortiz ran a fine 2:56:40 to win ahead of Ken Graham in 2:58:09. During the next year the bridge was built over the railway line to the power station and this added 325m to the course. However for 1986 the organisers were still able to use the original route for that section. Unfortunately they didn't tell the competitors from out-of-town and I had entered the first half marathon which started with the marathon and finished at Saltia.

Being the leader of the entire field from both events I didn't know which way to go approaching the gaol but I expected a marshal in attendance. To my dismay there was none but luckily a police officer was able to advise me that she "presumed" the course went over the new bridge. At least I had the OK from someone in authority – it just turned out to be wrong. The leader of the marathon, Greg Coulter was not that far behind and followed me, as did one or two others but those "in the know" went the old way and ran the correct distance, while Greg and I ran a further 325 metres in winning our respective events. Greg's time was 2:48:59 but it should have been in the mid 2:47's and my time for the extended half marathon was 1:15:23, a useful benchmark for my record attempt the following year.

In 1987 it was now or never as far as an attempt at the record went. I felt I had passed the time when I could set another marathon PB, which stood at 2:28:15 in the 1985 Big M Melbourne marathon, but I thought I could still break 2:40 at Pichi Richi. The date of the marathon had been brought forward to 14th June 1987, the earliest in the year it has ever been held, and this clashed with the Australian marathon championship in Sydney. However I had run this event the previous three years and was happy to miss it this time.

My preparation was reasonable, with several 100km plus weeks including some at 130km and a few half marathons around 1:13. The previous weekend I won my club's cross country championship, a very hilly 5-lap 10km in 39:42, but finished two minutes behind a visitor from Victoria, Glen Devers who had run sub 2:40 marathons when he was 16. That indicated to me that I was ready.

On the day I had the advantage of being able to chase the leader of the half marathon, Eddie Hughes from Whyalla who could run the distance in 68 minutes, and that helped me to maintain the pace I needed to keep to my goal of 2:35. However after Stirling I knew I would need to leave the course for a short while and that accounts for my relatively slow 17th km split. I had been keeping Eddie in sight until that point, estimating him to be no more than 400m ahead, but after my stop he had disappeared. Feeling much better I reached half way in 1:16:22 and felt confident of maintaining the required pace to break 2:40.

The wind sprung up after Saltia and tended to be swirly but the winding nature of the course meant that it wasn't too bad overall. I got to 30km and decided to tackle the hills cautiously so that I would have something left in the tank for the downhill run home and therefore ran a series of 4:10 kms. Upon reaching the top at 35km I said to my anxious wife that I was "still on pace to do 2:37" and that I would see her at the finish.

A couple of km later I was surprised to hear someone call out to me from a van which pulled alongside - "are you the leader?" It was a film crew covering the event and I had completely forgotten about them. I answered "yes" and then they attempted to interview me.

"Have you any comment to make?" asked John Cornish.

Now when you are the leader in a marathon and chasing a course record with five kilometres to go the last thing you want to do is give an interview! I was feeling tired but running well but this suddenly broke my concentration. I had every right to exclaim a couple of well known words but instead and to my eternal relief ever since, I simply said "geez, let me get to the finish please" and as an afterthought gave him what he wanted to hear ... "I'm feeling OK".

"Well I won't talk to you again" said Mr Cornish.

The camera filmed me for a few more seconds and then they went away. About a kilometre later I regretted not giving them the interview because I believed a rush of adrenalin would have made me run faster! However I settled down, regained my concentration and prepared to savour the finish. I thought my time would be just over 2:38 but it ended up being just one second under 2:39, but that was OK. I had done it.

After a few minutes I was happy to be interviewed and Mr Cornish asked questions about the weather, the lack of competition and my next marathon. Second placed was Donald Haase in 2:57:44 and he was also interviewed, somewhat reluctantly - "I'm not much of a talker!" He also commented on the weather - "the wind!" The VHS video was made available for purchase and can now be found on YouTube.

Third placed was Max Kitto in 3:01:48 from Alan Cockshott in 3:02:08 and Ken Graham in 3:02:28. Every time I encounter Ken he insists on talking about this particular day and how he was keeping up with me until the first railway bridge. He and another mate, Peter Kotsoglous never let me forget the reason for my slow kilometre and insist on relating the story to anyone who'll listen. That and the interview attempt! I prefer my performance to be remembered for the things I had control over, NOT the things I couldn't control, but still, it is amusing!

In the next few years there were some attempts to break the 1987 mark, but none succeeded. In 1989 and 1990 Peter Tutty travelled from interstate and won both years in 2:45 and 2:42 respectively. He was unlucky in 1990 when the weather was stormy, but a look at his career shows a marathon PB of “only” 2:36:25, not quite low enough to have a realistic chance at Pichi Richi, at least according to the *consensus!*

In 1992 I decided to have another go at it, but my best days were clearly behind me and even though I trained hard, clocking up nearly a thousand more kilometres for the year to date than I had done in 1987, my five-year-old body was just not up to it and after reaching halfway in just under 1:20, I hit the wall badly and struggled home in 2:59:52, having to walk some of the way. I still managed to win by eight minutes from an up and coming Michael Slagter who went on to be victorious *five* times before the end of the century. Unfortunately Michael’s best chance to break three hours at Pichi Richi was thwarted by a train at Stirling!

The only other serious attempt came from Steve Guy in 1995 and he ended up winning in 2:46:51. In the new century the winning time was over three hours for eight consecutive years from 2003, the slowest being 3:25:08 in 2008 by Paul Greenwood, and indeed that year runner-up Mandy Towler came within five minutes of taking outright honours! Paul went on to win in 2014 in 2:57:37.

In 2013 John Csongei won the event in 2:51:46, the fastest time since Steve Guy’s attempt in 1995 and at the time his PB was 2:45:14 at Gold Coast six years previously. John since improved his PB to 2:34:28 at Gold Coast in 2014 and came agonisingly close to that at Canberra earlier this year, being only one second slower, but he scored an impressive fifth placing there!

I decided, with some reluctance I might add, to run the Pichi Richi Marathon this year *only* because it was the 30th anniversary of my course record. I was more tempted to travel to my home town of Mount Gambier for the new Tower Trail event, but I can do that another time, whereas there was only one chance at the 30th anniversary! I’d had a good run last year, in 3:46:26 and much to my surprise ran almost identical splits for each half (1:53:07 and 1:53:19). It was my fastest time there since 1995! I was not quite in such shape this year but was still confident of breaking four hours.

I’ve always thought it was ridiculous to be the course record holder for so long and for years I thought of publishing my kilometre splits in the hope that someone would think they could match them. Now I’m glad I didn’t. I only heard that John Csongei was going to make an attempt at the record at the previous week’s Torrens Park Run where some of the fast regulars there were discussing it. The talk was that John’s PB of 2:34 was not fast enough to do it. If you want to run sub 2:40 at Pichi Richi you need to be a sub 2:30 runner. I tended to agree, but for a different reason. I’d heard that John had been training 200km a week consistently and I thought that was a little too much, especially as he had been coming back from injury.

Nevertheless I was excited that finally someone suitably qualified was going to have a go at it. The only other person living in South Australia I could think of capable of breaking my record was Jess Trengrove but I was absolutely certain that she would not show up. These country marathons are not the place for world class athletes unless your name is Derek Clayton! Many people would be aware that Clayton set the record of 2:13:40 for the Traralgon Marathon in 1970 and not surprisingly it still stands!

I sent an email to Peter Kotsoglous informing him that John Csongei was going to attempt to set a new record and added “if he wants to break it he will have to run the first half in 1:15”, being mindful of the course profile. At Port Augusta the day before the marathon we “hoped” that he would show up. A little later we knew he was there when we drove to Quorn to leave a car there overnight so we could get back to Port Augusta next day. At about 5pm we spotted John running along the road out of Quorn and I realised he was just loosening up after the drive from Adelaide. Still it was a bit disconcerting! On the way back to Port Augusta we gave him a friendly toot and he smiled and waved. “That’s a good sign I said to Peter. He’s confident!”

Next morning the race was started a few moments late and it would appear “gun time” should be around eight seconds faster than the intended “clock time”. John Csongei took off like a startled gazelle and no-one bothered to go with him. I estimated him at 2:20 pace but it was even quicker than that, with a 3:16 first kilometre indicating a 2:17 marathon. However he settled down and ran to an obvious plan which called for even splits it would seem.

When I approached 26km I was passed by Dean Elliott who was in the half marathon, an event which started just two minutes after I reached the Saltia start line. The crowd gave me an enormous cheer and Sally Buckett yelled out “I’ll see you later with your clothes on”, a joke which goes back to the warm Yurrebilla day of a few years ago. Anyway, Dean said “in your younger days you’d be finished by now” and I looked at my watch which read 2:20 odd and said “well – in another twenty minutes”! I then thought to ask him what time the leader went through and he said “1:18” and I thought John had blown it and my record was safe.



Figure 1: New and former course record holders. John Csongei, all refreshed, had to wait more than an hour for Ian Hill to finish!

Photo by Rob Robinson

When I got to the finish I immediately asked someone I thought would know “what was the winning time” and one of the officials butted in and said “he broke the record by ten minutes”. Well I knew *that* was not right and the person I originally asked said “2 hours 36 minutes”. I thanked him, said “great” and pondered the accuracy of Dean Elliott’s information.

About ten minutes later I spotted John Csongei coming towards me with a huge smile on his face and we shook hands. I just said “well done” and said he must have run even splits and he confirmed that he had. Strangely enough, that was the first time I had met him. I asked him about the huge amount of training he was rumoured to have done and he put that right, saying he was averaging 170km a week and had reached 200km only a couple of times. That made more sense to me. I told him that his marathon PB was due for a large revision.

Summing up, I would say that John Csongei’s preparation for this event was immaculate. He was obviously supremely confident in his ability to run according to a race plan which required even splits, meaning he had to work the hills hard in the latter stages. He managed the first half easily within his ability and dropped up to ninety seconds behind my pace in 1987 but I had the advantage of feeding off the leader of the half marathon, Eddie Hughes. I ran the second half a bit more conservatively, not entirely by choice because of the wind, until I reached the top of the hills and then was able to coast home. Of course the bar was set lower for me and all I had to do was keep my concentration up, notwithstanding the unorthodox interruption I experienced! John had to push harder and did this superbly, running at 2:25 marathon pace over the last seven kms.

I wouldn’t be surprised if John, apart from the obvious reason of setting a new record, also considers this the best performance of his marathon career to date in a technical sense and if he can repeat that effort on a faster course and in a competitive race, I predict that a 2:25 marathon is well within his reach.

The graph shows how he did it, km by km. Although he was behind course record pace until 32 km, he clearly had the momentum with him from just after the halfway point.

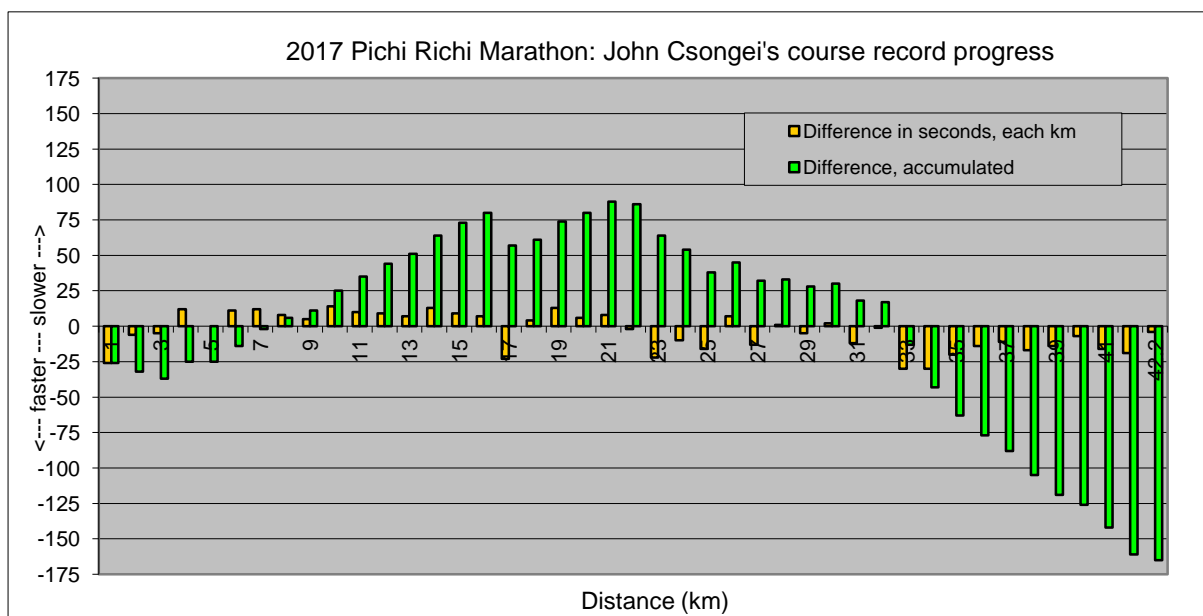


Figure 2: How it was done, kilometre by kilometre

Well done John Csongei! It's a great performance by a popular athlete and I hope he can hold the record for a fair while. For my part, I admit it feels a bit strange to lose it after all this time, I think mainly because it has been part of me for nearly half my lifetime, but then again I consider myself fortunate to have had it at all. The other part of the equation is that the event is still going which of course made John's feat possible and that is indicative of the community support for the Pichi Richi Marathon Festival.

July 2017