

CIM 2025

By: Henry

Tech notes:

46 deg F

Shoes: Metaspeed Sky Tokyo (the one for “cadence” runners, whatever that means)

Decided in the morning not to take bicarb, the thought of eating it just didn’t “spark joy”

3 PF gels non caffeine (took 1 at 10 min before start) + 1 PF caff (took halfway) + 2 SiS 40g

Picked up 2 PF non caffeine and 1 PF caff (took around ~19 mi)

Took electrolytes at most aid stations, water if I missed the electrolytes

Carb-loaded heavily 2 days out and then took the day before pretty normal

Lining up with the 2:55 pace group, I felt nervous, the same nerves that I had felt on the start line of each prior marathon. This may seem like a trivial point, but the marathon *hurts* and at some point it hurts bad — but how badly would it hurt today and how would I react when that time came? But there was also a different feeling today, one that I was not so used to on the start line. It was something that approximated peace, knowing that with the help of my coach, I had meticulously prepared for this race and had completed a quality training block to the best of my ability. The cool Californian air made it uncomfortable to take off my outer layers, but this was perfect for fast racing. My thoughts turned to Cindy - I was sad she wouldn’t be racing this morning due to an injury but I felt her support: driving me to near the race start, playing Moana on the car ride over, and I looked forward to seeing her later in the race.

I wanted to race aggressively, but also race smart. In particular I planned to keep the first few hills purely sub-threshold so that I could take advantage of the second half of the course which is mostly downhill. During the first 5k, I remember feeling like the effort was manageable but definitely not easy, and I became alarmed that I would blow up in the second half. Memories from Napa ‘25 came back and my brain kept trying to compare the feelings this morning against whatever fragments it had conjured up from the past. “What if all this training for the past year was for nothing?” It’s just a negative thought, I tried to reassure myself, it has no authority over me. But I was concerned that I was having such thoughts so early in the race. Focus on executing the race, I told myself: run the tangents, stay relaxed, and stay on track with the gels. Actually, it was not too hard to get out of my thoughts, as there were always a lot of runners around me. Overall I love running with lots of others during a race; I find the group energy helpful and I like trying to draft off of others. But a downside is that the first few aid stations were extremely chaotic. This is something I learned last CIM but almost forgot; unfortunately there was a good deal of pushing and shoving to get fluids, which resulted in missing a few drink stations and also missing a gel pickup at mi 6. I definitely felt some frustration but I also laughed at myself, thinking that now I have something in common with elite marathoners complaining about missing their bottles.

During the first 10k, despite trying to keep the effort under control, I felt I was still pushing on the uphill to not fall too behind, and even on the downhills I was working a bit to catch up. I remembered a cue that Cindy taught me, to focus on leading from the hips, and this seemed to loosen things up. I also took a peek and saw that my watch HR was ~160-162, around what I consider “steady”, a bit below average marathon heart rate, so this gave me some confidence. I know full well that my watch HR is basically a random number generator on race day, but I also know my psychology...

I decided I would try to hang on to this pace group until ~ mi 12 (the last of the Folsom hills), and then try to push ahead. I recalled Coach Serena’s encouragement to race fearlessly, and I put on my sunglasses as a corny reminder to not look back. As I started to gap the 2:55 pace group, I had a similar sensation to CIM 2024: despite almost completing a half marathon, my legs somehow felt relatively fresh! And strangely, although I was running a bit faster, the effort didn’t really increase. I did some mental math and figured that I would likely cross the halfway

point slightly faster than my half-marathon PR from 4 weeks ago. That felt nearly max-effort at the time (I still blame forgetting my super shoes), so this was a pleasant surprise. I fell into a nice rhythm: gradually moving through the field during the flats, maintaining my position on the uphill, and surging ahead to the next pack on the downs.

As mile 19 rolled around, the lack of feeling intensely fatigued became more and more surprising. The only part of my body that was really hurting was my left arm, which was about ready to call it quits from swinging back and forth all this time. Normally one or more parts of my legs are badly aching, but today I felt like I was still running with my usual form, and was also aerobically intact. I thought back on previous races where I felt I didn't manage to completely empty the tank, and became determined to give it everything. Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice: it was Cindy cheering me on — she told me that I was doing awesome, which definitely gave me a big boost.

At mile 20, I told myself: you trained to easily tolerate 40+min at threshold intensity; anything less and you are running below your potential. Realistically, one can only hope for an A+ race once every few years at the marathon distance; today could be that day. Don't waste it, I lectured myself. With 5k to go, I cut down to 6:16 and 6:11 mi, and then 5:48/mi in the last 0.3 mi. It was really hard mentally to force myself to increase the pace this much, but I was extremely motivated when I saw the times come down. You have trained for and run 5 km races before, it is supposed to feel VERY HARD! In past races I have sadly witnessed a lot of carnage during the last miles of a marathon, but maybe due to nearly ideal race conditions, I saw very few people that were walking or in great distress, which was pretty cool. In fact, it seemed like the median runner around me was going strong and also picking it up, but if one trusts my de-myelinated brain, not a single runner passed me in the last 5 km.

Crossing the finish line, I was flooded with emotions, chief among them disbelief and gratitude. I thought of some Japanese marathoners (and also some ultra-runners like Killian) who bow to the course marker, and in that moment felt that I understood precisely why one would do that. A wave of relief passed, and I began to feel nauseous. The CIM finish chute is quite long, and in a semi-delirious state I started to chat with a fellow runner who had finished more than a minute ahead of me. Seeing the look of pure joy on his face was definitely a race highlight. "I can't believe I just did that" he said, "I am 35 years old and just beat my PR by 30 minutes!".

Looking back at the numbers, perhaps what I found most surprising was that I ran a 1:24:06 half marathon in the second half, where I had projected my half marathon fitness to be around 1:25:00 (on a good day). While CIM definitely exceeded my expectations, a question that I have asked myself is: did I pace the race too conservatively? I have two comments. The first half of CIM is significantly harder than the second half in terms of elevation profile, so I believe that an even split on a flat course is equivalent to a negative split at CIM. But more importantly, I believe that I paced myself to my potential given the information I had going in. For the first 10k, there were really no signs that I was having an A+ day; as the race progressed, this became more clear and I think I updated my prior and reacted accordingly.

For me, I am drawn to marathoning in part because it is a fairly controlled experiment. You train as hard as you can, and while you get some information about your fitness in training, there is always uncertainty about your true marathon potential on the race day that you are given. Putting aside absolute times (and certainly I believe that my absolute time is not that impressive for a 30 yr old male), what is strangely satisfying is knowing your running body-mind well enough to get the most out of it on race day. I think this strange and elusive feeling, something that might approximate mastery of self, is something I want to keep with me going forward. It is something I want to cherish, even if I accessed this feeling via the silly little experiment of running 26.2 miles.

California International Marathon 2025, 2:51:11