

**On or Off the W&OD**  
**Fat Tuesday Marathon**  
**Feb 5, 2006**  
**Mike Moyer**

That's the correct translation for the Mardi Gras Marathon, but some of you didn't know that. No, you didn't. So, now you know. Mardi Gras means Fat Tuesday. That's why they call it Mardi Gras. It permits people to be in denial. Besides, who would want to go to New Orleans to celebrate Fat Tuesday.

I've been staying in Baton Rouge which is about seventy-three miles from New Orleans, but decided to stay in New Orleans the night before the marathon instead of getting up long before dawn and driving down to make the 0700 start time.

The small bottle of mouth wash, some scented soap and a complimentary robe, didn't convince me that the room at the Pere Marquette Renaissance Hotel on Crown St. was worth the \$70.00 more than what the Residence Inn in Baton Rouge charges. Plus, they charged \$28.00 overnight parking, and \$9.95 for internet access. I would have parked on the street had there been a space open, but there wasn't. Still, one is lucky to find a room in New Orleans these days, and I did get a fairly decent night's sleep.

After dinner at the Red Fish Grill, I walked down Bourbon St. Maybe I'm getting old, but I turned back after just a couple blocks. The bars, strip clubs, and souvenir stores with t-shirts sporting such innovative print on them as "I Survived Katrina," or "F.E.M.A. – Federal Employees Messing Around" and others not fit to print just didn't have the same attraction for me that they might have if I were thirteen years old; okay twenty something and single. So, I walked back to the hotel to call it an early night.

Following my usual practice, I laid out my running gear before hitting the sack, pinned the bib number to my Marine Corps Marathon singlet, and laced the championship chip into my running shoe.

The alarm went off at 0530.

It didn't take long to dress, so I made a little coffee and turned on the weather channel. It would be a perfect day for running. The temperature was in the low forties and not expected to rise higher than the low sixties. Sunshine. No wind. Perfect. At about 0630 I zipped the hotel key in my running shorts pocket and left the hotel. Runners were making their way to the Superdome through otherwise empty streets on this early Sunday morning, February 5.

This was to be the first major sporting event in New Orleans since the Hurricanes of last year. Much of the city's population is still temporarily housed elsewhere and thousands of homes sit vacant and substantially damaged. On Saturday, I rode through much of the devastated area, including the Ninth Ward, one of the hardest hit in the city, and also the

least likely to be restored any time soon. Most of the housing stock there is old or was in marginal condition before the levee broke and poured water into the area. Many homes collapsed or were washed off their foundations into the street or into an adjoining structure. Piles of debris are everywhere and navigating through the neighborhoods is challenging. While you've heard it many times it is still true; pictures just don't tell the story.

When the race began promptly at 0700, over two thousand marathoners and half marathoners took off down Poydras, turned left on St. Peters to Decatur St., skirted the French Quarter passing by Jackson Square and the Café Du Monde, famous for its Café Au Lait and Beignets, then up Esplanade Ave. and into City Park. On the way through City Park we detoured into the community of Lakeview where water had reached a depth of 7 feet or more in homes

While the streets weren't lined with crowds of cheering people, those who did turn out were loud in their support. There was even a bagpiper at one point and occasionally people would call out from their porch or balcony.

Despite the difficulty, the marathon organizers put on a first class run. Police turned out at every intersection. Timekeepers called out split times at every mile marker. Water and Gatorade stops were positioned at least every 2 miles or so. They even had people dispensing gobs of Vaseline at random points for those who might be chafing, and a few stations offered replenishing gels.

Coming out of City Park, we found our way back to the Superdome. The half marathoners ran across the finish line to cheers and congratulations while the marathoners were ushered to the right around the other side of the Superdome to complete the last half of their race. Once onto Prytanian St. headed for Audubon Park, the scenery changed dramatically. The flood waters never came here, and except for some minor wind damage, this area was spared. According to its own website (which might be accused of bias), the Garden District "comprises one of the best-preserved collections of historic mansions in the South -- if not the entire country. It is a brilliant tapestry of architectural styles and period designs."

As we entered Audubon Park an announcer called out runners names and where they hailed from and people cheered. Flagging spirits were instantly buoyed as runners had now traversed a little more than 18 miles and some were hitting that all famous wall. By this time the field had spread out so there was distance between contenders. Joined by weekend strollers, bicyclists (no Fred Lonas, though) and joggers, runners circumnavigated the park and headed back toward the finish line, now less than six miles away.

As I rounded the last curve of the Superdome, I could hear the announcer calling, "If you are within the sound of my voice, you can finish in less than 4 hours," so I picked up my pace, even though the last miles had begun to convince me that red snapper was not the

right choice for dinner the night before, and that running one day a week for the past several weeks was not a good training regimen. My official time was 3:59:13.

A trio of matronly ladies were there to hang a finisher's medal around sweaty necks, a rock band played loud on the level above the finish line, and the usual banana, orange, and apple staples were there for the famished. Unique to New Orleans was a group offering red beans and rice in small bowls. I went back to them three times.

Needing to shower and check out of the hotel, I didn't linger longer. As I stood at the hotel desk my cell phone rang. The Loudoun Road Runners had finished their Sunday run and were recovering over coffee, and wanted to see how the marathon went for me. While they couldn't be there to cheer, they took the time to check on the result. It was good to hear friendly voices.