

## Foolhardiness at Its Best

The Grand Prix de Monaco with Formula One race cars has been run the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend in my lifetime. The course has 12 turns and seven jiggles, including a sharp right, a sweeping right, a hairpin followed by two tight righthand turns leading into the tunnel, a chicane followed by a sharp left, leading into a short straightaway with a swerving left into it and a swerve to the right coming out of, before the final two right turns into the final straightway. The course is turn after turn after turn after turn, lap following lap. Lots to see and not enough time to see anything but the next turn.

The 3.3km Monaco course is not flat. The city road course climbs steeply after the first turn at the start of each lap where the drivers climb all the way to the high point of Casino Square at the fourth turn. The race course is just above the seawall at its lowest point and almost 90meters above the sea at the highest point, that being near the Casino. Of course, the cars eventually fly downhill to the tunnel. The drivers have one chance per lap to open up the throttle: 669meters at 290 kph. Monaco is a chess player's race; it's not a fast race.

Later, that same Sunday morning, the Greatest Spectacle in Racing starts: 33 race cars lined up three abreast at the opening lap and then some laps going through four side by side for the first of four quick lefthand turns on the 2.5 mile oval. Racing at the Indianapolis 500 opens up to over 240 mph on the back straight, the drivers hanging onto the steering wheel, hoping the tires hold through each turn, sweeping down the front straight over the one yard of laid brick, repeating the process for 200 laps.

F1 cars are designed to be faster than the Indy cars, the road courses slowing the F1 cars and the ovals pushing the Indy car speed limits. In each, the drivers manage their fuel, concurrently pushing the limits on race track, tethering their desire to push the envelope. Listening to the race cars slow dramatically when a yellow flag demands, the anger within those engines can be heard like a laborious low growl of a den of lions arguing over a kill, the race car design commanding they run unchecked.

That's how a Memorial Day 5km should be: run at full go, hopefully holding race pace to the finish. It's not a sprint, though it is to be a much faster pace than a marathon. That didn't happen for me. I chose the wrong course.

I didn't know I'd chosen a cross country race until the course director described it to us, just before the start. It was to be cross country racing at its best: three laps in the park, each loop the same as the one before or after it. Wet, slick grass leading to a narrow path of crushed gray gravel with short and steep downhills and short steep uphill's, no straight path, too much shade hiding the ground's undulation, and too much hot sun in the flat stretches loosening the crushed gravel. No one was spared.

A classic start for a cross country course is a wide spread of mowed grass, allowing the runners to basically sprint to the trail. This course had that, starting us off with a steady 700-meter decline on grass still wet from the cool of the prior evening and still shaded. Wearing running shoes with a flat, smooth outsole is not conducive to aggressive downhill racing. Neither does a tight lefthand turn with wet shoes assist in the transition from grass to an immediate steep uphill on the trail. For the rest of the race, we ran on the uneven, crushed gravel, for whatever that was worth.

We all powered up the steep hill, seeing a short crest with a mature tree in the middle of the righthand turn leading us into another short, steep uphill, leading to another swerve to the right for a long gentle incline to a sharp lefthand turn leading to a sweeping curve to the left followed by a gentle tug to the right just over the road breaking up the path. Following that were two short steep uphill's before a short uphill straight brought us to another sharp left decline, a right turn to an uphill, leading into a chicane of a left and then a right and then a sharp up leading to another sharp up before a dip and a lean to the left for a long and very steep left, leading quickly to a short, steep uphill tied to a steep downhill, before a sharp left and the steep incline to reach that damned tree. Three times we reached and passed that tree. Not to mention churning our legs up each hill three times and using our heels and knees to absorb the shocks of each downhill.

Though there weren't many of us in this race, we each faced the same dilemma: how quickly can we get to the final loop, the finish chute, so that we could walk our recovery. Apparent to each of us was the realization that we simply had to grind out the course. Racing cross country is evil in its simplicity: you will quit before the race course does.

This was my opening race for the summer of 5k racing. My race plan included pushing the first 1.3 miles at a strong, hard pace, the kind of pace that would draw deep gulps of air. I love that feeling in a short race. Ignore the brain and listen to the inner rhythm drawn from the legs and arms moving in practiced unity in a race for as long as I could hold the pace. Racing like a child, running as fast as I can for as long as I can and then resting until I can run fast again is exhilarating. Not on this course. Repeatedly facing yet another hill – up or down – stole the energy out of my legs.

Running slower than I would in a marathon, I pushed up each uphill, threw myself into each downhill, repeating the process several times over on each lap, seeing the same little ups, memorizing the same ruts in the trail, the same leaf covered tree limbs giving me shade, feeling the heat from the morning sun when I emerged from that shade. Some runners passed me; I passed more back. With each lap, my pace slowed from cautious pacing to slow racing to grind-it-out-to-the-finish pace. I am certain I grimaced. I am equally as certain that I kept up the effort. I simply could not compete against those hills on equal footing.

And yes, I am complaining. To myself.