

Should She Leap

Turning around a long lefthand corner on the trail, still feeling the muddy water draining from my race flats, I glanced further ahead, seeing her standing in the middle of the path in the ninth mile of a half marathon. She was just standing. In the middle of a race. Looking just beyond her, I saw what she must have come upon a half a minute before me. Who does that?

During the first half of the race, I'd concentrated on keeping with the two women running side by side just in front of me. Though I was focused on their shoes – one a pair of grey Saucony Endorphin Speeds, the other pair of Brooks Cumulus – with each bend in the road or turn onto another street, one would glance back, saying to the other, "he's still there." Just in front of them was a sourpuss looking male runner whose body language displayed his displeasure at having to run hard to stay just ahead of them. Also, we had a muscle-bound fellow who didn't understand that running a consistent pace was better than sprinting for 200 yards followed by a gasping, air-deprived walk. The women would eventually finish just in front of me at the riverfront finish, but not before I passed them into the wooded, crushed gravel running path from Mile 7 to just after the Mile 9 mark, with an asphalt road in the middle, also treelined and also flat. The two fellows slowly disappeared into the ether, somewhere behind us.

The trail a wide path, shaded by the mature trees and undergrowth sitting tight along both sides of the path. The gravel was finely crushed, mostly evenly leveled. The trail itself meandered in a slow snake-like fashion. Any runner who had run cross country would instinctively drop their trunk towards the ground, letting the knees become shock absorbers, much like a skier gliding through a mogul field, the feet landing on the soft ground before launching towards the path's next curve.

When the trail is dry, the sense of gliding lightly and quickly becomes reality. When the trail is dry. In the days leading up to the race, a storm burst upon the early May scene, dropping serious waterdrops, accumulating in low lying areas. The meandering path apparently is a low lying area. Who knew?

The first half of the trail had little hints, little puddles that we each easily raced over. We ignored the little hints. Immediately in the second half of the trail, we were given a clue in the form of a safety vested fellow standing next to an ATV watching each of us as we passed him towards several medium-sized puddles, over which some of us chose to leap while others pranced around the puddle edges. The puddles became bigger and some deeper until we ran to a distant lefthand sweep that led us to her.

She had her reasons: several deep, wide, muddy ponds covering the entirety of the trail from left to right, and others from right to left. She was standing at the edge of the lengthy series of deep water because she could see dry patches between the ponds. Even at my race pace, I estimated the odds of coming out that lengthy standing water were small to nil. I also determined that I could not successfully leap between each oversized puddle onto the dry islands and keep upright, much less running. She made a different calculation.

As we approached her, she suddenly backed up 10 steps, then exploded into a short sprint, leaping just in front of the first large puddle onto the first dry island, before taking two race steps and leaping just in front of the second large puddle onto . . . the deadass middle of the second puddle. She didn't give up. She accelerated through the six-inch

deep water and onto the next dry island, leaping again, though neither as high nor as far as her first two leaps, directly in the middle of the third deep puddle. She gave up running, succumbing to the ignominy of sloshing in the deep middle of the remaining puddles, water, thin mud, and more mud-infested water spray her from head to foot. Her white race shoes were now another hue of black, brown, gray, dank. Her below-the-knee black running tights were another unnamed but distinctive hue, of something. The white running blouse she chose was destined for a deep bleach or the retired bin, whichever came first. She carried on, in front of us, shoes squeaking and her movements causing a squishing sound.

Our group following directly behind her, each having made their respective decisions on how to handle this unforeseen obstacle, saw her out of the periphery of our views. The sprinter dude avoided the water, running into the brush immediately against the path, not be seen at the finish until much later. Mr. poker face sourpuss cried aloud, sounding like a wounded animal before he, too, was swallowed by the woods. He eventually came out looking wet, bedraggled, wearing a now grayish-colored racing kit. I estimated my best means of maintaining a semblance of my race pace through the mis-mash was to plow through it all, on the tips of my toes. I succeeded in not drowning. All the while the two women just behind giggled while splashing just a few strides behind me.

We all came out of woods and the next two miles into the park, leaving the crushed gravel paths behind us. She found her boyfriend, husband, significant other, on the side of the race, cheering her onwards. She stopped, hugging him, for which he became as wet as she was from her puddle-leaping challenge. I smiled, the women passed me, Mr. sourpuss poker-face and the sprinter dude remained still in the woods for all we knew, and we sallied forth towards the finish a 5km away. Somewhere on that race course, in the deepest part of the woods, remain Mr. poker face sourpuss and the sprinter dude. Or perhaps they finished. Perhaps not.

Training comes in all forms and at all times. We learn how to run consistently and how to learn our own pacing. Hilly courses lead to running faster on the flatland. Repeats with intervals show us how to run faster and maintain a quicker pace. Race puddles? Those puddles remind us that being wet, grimy, and squeaky is an honor, as well as a good story.

Still wonder about Mr. poker face sourpuss and the sprinter dude, though.