

Soccer in May

It's late May.
The humidity has begun to assert itself with authority.
Morning track workouts are becoming necessary but not yet a routine.
Running the high school track in the morning remains uninterrupted.
Four high school aged boys show up.
I hear school let out early.
It's finals week.
They each carry two soccer balls.
There are a couple of small goals in tow.
Several brightly colored small cones are spread across the goal line.
My warming up in lane nine is not seen as a threat.
Their warming up, kicking a ball in a tight circle, is not seen as a threat.
Following a few strides, a bit of form drills, and retying shoelaces, I'm ready to glide.
An over-exuberant kicked ball and they're ready to roll.
Glances my way suggest I recognize each errant ball's existence.
I momentarily ignore the soccer balls scurrying over the track lanes.
I'm there to run quick repeats around the track.
They eye the loose balls spread around the track.
I eye the first turn into my first repeat lasting not quite a full lap.
Each ball finds its own path before stopping.
One is next to the bleacher.
Another is edging the inside of the track.
One more is nestled in lane five at the top of the track's north curve.
I push the pace and none are in my way.
Into my first short recovery jog, I spot each orphaned ball.
I angle my approach, come to a full stop, pick up a ball, turn and toss onto the grass.
Jogging onwards towards my next repeat starting point, I hear a "thank you."
I nod.
The second repeat is the same distance, quicker pace.
I see one ball has returned to the track's middle lanes.
Again recovering, I stop, pick up the ball, turning and tossing the ball towards the players.
Eye contact is made; I receive a nod and a smile.
Time to continue the repeats.
The distance varies.
The pacing steadily accelerates.
The stride begins to find its groove.
The recoveries creep into a slow decent into sloth jogging.
You know, the jog that makes you wonder if the runner is seriously trying to hurt himself.
I find myself beginning each recovery picking up, turning. and tossing soccer balls.
Always back into the football field.
20 minutes into my track workout, the players notice I'm still running.
I'm their grandfathers' age; I see that realization in their expressions.

I'm not so self-absorbed that I don't catch them occasionally watching my efforts.
They ascertain I'm running intervals.
They subconsciously equate my intervals to their running goal post to goal post.
But they only do it when their coach demands they do it.
They don't like doing it.
They'd rather play one on one or two on two.
They'd rather scrimmage, racing up and down the long field of grass.
Long kicks, powerful and graceful stretches for the ball, leading them towards a goal.
But they do it.
Sometime during the first part of my workout, a teen girl known to them arrives.
She warms up in running sweats.
She stretches.
The players watch her.
Balls kind of find their way closer to her.
The balls and the players are ignored.
The sweats are removed, leaving half tights and a half shirt.
The players add more sweat to their brows.
The ignoring continues.
The pattern is timeless and obvious.
I start and finish each repeat always at the same but separate lines on the track.
The repeat's finish is 3/4 around the track from the repeat's start.
Each time.
They've figured out when I'm running fast and when I'm retrieving their soccer balls.
One has a running watch on his left wrist.
He hits his start button when I start a repeat.
He chose wisely.
She waits for me to run past.
Because his eyes follow me, the others view the same effort.
That repeat is scheduled to begin the fastest phase of my workout.
I don't see him hit his watch, stopping time for a moment.
I didn't need to see him.
His boisterous exclamation to his compatriots told me his reaction to my split time.
Collectively, they verbalize their impression of my effort.
On this easy interval, I again pick and toss back a ball.
I hear four "thank you's," not quite in unison, but with a teenage roar.
I look towards them, my jogging bringing me sort of close.
A gentle wave from my hand at the end of my upraised arm is offered.
Smiles are exchanged.
For a moment, but for just a moment, she is forgotten.
Then she runs, her stride that of a gazelle, cellphone in her left hand.
They turn their attention to her.
My workout is complete.
Before I leave the track, I retrieve another soccer ball.
All is as it should be.