

Track Soloist

Rolling out of my slow jog interval into my next repeat, relaxing my lower jaw, gently touching my thumb to just under my index finger, I gazed beyond the curve to the straightaway, as far down as I could see without dramatically turning my head. So far I had achieved my goal in consistently gobbling up the most distance I could in one minute. I had my rhythm for the workout. While I thought I was lifting my thigh before setting my foot down as quickly as I could before I raised the opposition leg's thigh, no one else was on the track to notice my form.

There is a nuanced rhythm in training on the track. I am not racing yet; I am purposefully running faster than when I race or my daily training pace. The immediate goal is teaching the legs to go faster than usual and then teach the mind to increase the pace with each repeat. When I do both, I've had a good track session.

Spring is here. The marathon is completed. The recovery is finished. Spring weather will flow into the summer's heat and humidity, which equates to shorter racing. It's track time. Can't get faster without running faster. No better place to learn to run faster than a standard oval track, designed for fast running. And for me, the track most accessible to me is a nine lane high school track, a 25-minute drive from my house.

The track is black, set in a north-south orientation. The east side of the track is protected by the main grandstand, metal benches embedded from the north end to the south end of the main straight. The start/finish is at the north end of the main metal bench grandstand. Tall, stately trees that are in full leaf throughout the spring and summer push against the chain link fence from the first turn, down the back straight, ending at the beginning of the second curve. Just outside the fence at the south end are the restrooms, separating the track from the baseball diamond.

Each lane holds painted white lines for different distances, sprints, relays, and marked points for longer distances to break towards the inside lane. The white lane numbers are in four distinct locations, each 100 meters from the next closest set. Four sets of red triangles mark the beginning and the end of each exchange zone for the 4x100m relay, each set going into or out of a curve.

Not all the lanes are equal. Lane one has several almost imperceptible ripples, given that it is the most popular running lane. Run that lane, especially the curves, more than a couple of times and your feet will find the dips before your eyes zero in on the undulations. You learn to quietly weave inside the lane into and out of the curves. The best lands are 4 through 7 because those are not as dimpled or blemished. Running for time on the track makes these lanes more enjoyable than torquing the knees around the first couple of the inside lanes.

But poor lane nine. A big wind brings the fallen limbs, twigs, leaves, and evergreen sprigs directly onto the lane. For much of the summer, that tree refuse remains, not even moved by the outside lane walkers. Unless a school district maintenance worker comes to clear the debris, you learn to dance around the sticks, and the sap. All that said, it is the track I choose and has become my go to, my comfort zone, and my rendezvous with intervals.

Running intervals on the track on a mid-morning day in early May is a solo endeavor. The early morning walkers stalking the outside lanes have long since left the track. The younger runners remain in classes until Memorial Day where I live; they won't be on the

infield before taking up the nine lanes of the track until mid-afternoon, long after I've left. Until the late spring gives way to the summer heat, I'll have all lanes to myself.

Today's quest was how far could I get around the track in one minute, followed by a two-minute jog, and even more, could I run consistently relaxed for each of the 10 repeats. That was all. Scaled down to its essence, which is running. Can I run from here to there and what is my time, what is my pace, and can I run that again? Those are the same questions we ask ourselves whenever and wherever we run.

Today, here was starting somewhere on the track followed by the minute of paced running to there, somewhere else on the track. Each repeat had both a different starting place and completion point. The long uncut grass blade to the shard of wood on the opposite side of the track, the square drainage cover just before the field's 50-yard line to the drainage cover past the other side's 50, the thin cover of track on the end of the southern curve to the 100m line on the opposite end of the northern curves. Those were my here's and there's, or at least a few of them.

Those markers come quickly, to be replaced by the next markers, and the next. Setting the mark is part of the mind's jumble in both focus and relaxed running. I need both to get quickly around the track. The goal is simple; the day is won through consistency. Today's workout is one day to improve to the next run. It is my chit to play the next round. Like a child, today is the most important serious thing I do until the next most important serious thing I do. Isolated on that track, those are my thoughts.

I have no one watching me. No one is sitting in the stands or walking the track to witness my moment. There is no one with whom to share the workout or its meaning. The birds chirping, the sound of cars from the roadways surrounding the track, and the wind rustling the leaves, are all white noise. What I hear are the words in my head cajoling me to be smooth with my increased pace. I feel the rhythm of the stride, the relaxed speed I've created. Today I practice uninterrupted.