

## Mean It

Standing in a short line filled with runners demanding their race medal on a hot, humid June morning, I waited my turn in collecting my award. The fact I was standing there wasn't a reflection that I needed yet another medal. I have raced to more than I still possess.

If I didn't take the medal, it would be placed in a box, put into someone's shed with other uncollected medals, forgotten until the box, with the medal in it, would be taken to a county collection dump, transported to a regional waste site, added to a hill of dumped items, never knowing I was the one that had earned that medal.

And, while a middle-aged woman argued with the race volunteer assigned to hand out each medal, check off the name from a printout listing the top three time finishers in each age division from pre-birth to post-death, I graciously accepted mine from the distracted volunteer, making certain I had the correct etching for first place in the men's pre-social security category and headed to my car.

The race had been a short one, a 5kilometer or 3.1-mile race, if you will. The morning had been just under steamy hot, the air thick and still, the sun drenching the small town with a promise of more heat as this day continued. The town seemingly existed in the middle of rural nowhere, until I inspected the homes along part of the race route while warming my body up for the race. Two-story homes with large windows, paint maintained on the wood siding, and yards that were lovingly tended to by their groundskeeper owners. Each street with mature, tall, heavily leafed trees. A nice town to visit.

There was a 10-mile race held at the same time as the 5km, but this June in the Mid-South, just before the start of summer. I know that course: rolling on long hills with a steep one into the mouth of the morning heat. Over the years it is normally raced on an extremely hot and humid day, no respite from the sun exacerbating the weather effect. It's a course that deserves a better fate, say, late October when the temperatures are 40 degrees cooler and the humidity is replaced with apple-crips air.

This 5km is a microcosm of the 10-mile course. A long uphill in the first mile, rolling up and down in the tree-lined second mile, a long shaded incline followed by a gentle downhill in the final race to the downtown finish, shops on one side of the main drag, the train tracks on the other. Not that I noticed.

There are as many theories on how to properly race a road 5km as there are runners who race them. The essence of those theories is simple: when do you put down the hammer and race. Some wait until the last mile, sprinting like demons

chasing victims. Some spread out their race pace evenly between each of the three miles or over the 5 kilometers. Still others push their pace just after the race, confident they have saved energy for another day. We each race within our comfort zone.

A 5km is not a long race in comparison to a 10-mile effort, or a half marathon to a marathon, but it is a distance far enough that we wouldn't walk that far to shop. Though it is not a power distance as one raced on a track, it requires strength. And it is a race. A race meant to be given the respect it deserves. Committing to race it means racing it.

There is a study out there in the ether that strongly suggests the means of properly racing a road 5km is to push the opening mile, hang onto that pace in the second, pushing your limit in the last. Myriad reasons explain why that method works, but it really comes down to the reality that this is a race, a three-mile race, but a race that is over before you have the luxury of easing into it. It's a race.

Of course, there are other studies that remind you to race within a time aligning with where you are and not where you want to be. Male Olympic-level 5000meter runners can pop a sub 4:00 mile and female 5000 runners can drop a 4:30 mile when needed. That pace doesn't work for the rest of us. Our hammering the first mile as if it were the last mile we will ever run is foolish.

But if you know you can run 9:00 pace for three consecutive miles and you want to race faster, then pushing the opening mile 15-20 seconds quicker, sustaining the pace for another mile leading into the final mile effort is going to get you closer to your want-to-be-faster goal than comfortably cruising along. This race distance is too short for a long distance mentality.

But I only speak for myself.

This morning, the factors melding around in my head gave me the following: the morning was hot, it was humid, the course was rolling to hilly into and away from the blinding early morning sun, and my current effort on a flat course would be just over 8:00 per mile. I also knew that the best time for my age group on this course was 26:21, from which I, correctly, surmised that this was not a fast course. I set my mind's sight on finishing under that time. I was right, barely.

With a quick downhill at the start, we raced onto the main street away from the downtown to a long, steady climb into the brutal sun's glare before turning a sharp left onto a gentle incline leading to another curving left with ballfields on each side of a street, shaded, the sun behind us, reaching the first mile. My idea of grinding out a quick first mile became just a grind.

Had it not been for the older gentleman farmer gliding past me early in the second mile, I would have dug into my comfort zone and hung out, convinced that today's race wasn't worthy of opening the hurt locker. He wore black nondescript running shoes, old guy running shorts, a well-worn running shirt, and a ballcap. Initially, I thought he was old looking, until I reminded myself that I was old looking. I wasn't looking any younger than he and I certainly wasn't racing any faster.

His passing by at that juncture snapped me into race mode. Running a race with other like-minded runners means actually racing each other. I am no longer young so I can easily ignore the high-school and college-aged runners so far ahead of me that I can't see them through all the twists and turns the course offered. I am now old enough that I can't even compare myself to runners currently raising children and who have careers, though I can see them for at least the first part of the race. I am a runner of a certain age, who can only see those around him, hearing the others racing to keep up. I raced to keep up with him.

The second mile had a left into the older, stately home neighborhood, with a quick right, another quick right that led us on another half-mile long gentle glide up to a turnaround at a cemetery, the course then taking a right and another right on the highway into the town. Even when I was younger, faster, and able to leap tall buildings, the fact that my racing world became who was around me fascinated me. That is my race world for as long as it lasts. The different race shirts blurring into a kaleidoscope of color, the different running styles mixing into an ever-evolving samba train, all moving like an elongated ribbon blowing a breeze.

In this second mile, I saw the same dozen or so runners, those racing in front of me and those just behind me. I kept score, looking for runners to pass and running fast enough not to be passed. Without taking more than a blink of a well-trained eye, I could tell who had the energy to keep up and those who were fading. That was my race world.

He ran the uphill portions of the second mile with seeming ease. I struggled to keep up. I graced the downhills much as a deer gliding through the tall grass. He grumbled with each of my downhill passes. On a long uphill leading into the third mile, he inched away from me. Okay, he really yarded me, gaining a sizeable distance.

Fixated on him, determinedly increasing my pace in the last mile to pass him, I ignore the other runners around us: the little high school girl with the matching kit, the young mother of three (I saw her kids with her husband after the race), the 30-something cut fellow who kept stopping and would sprint by us time and again, and

the woman of a certain age with the running tights matching her top. I had found my finish zone pace and only he was there.

Down the long straight to the finish, I finally passed him. He passed me back. Knowing where we were to the finish line, I began my sprint, my rhythm increasing with each stride. He matched me. Funny that I noticed, but our breathing wasn't heavy, our legs weren't tired. Each of us focusing on finishing ahead of the other. No one seemed to be in front of us; no one was coming from behind.

The fun in racing a short race is that you don't have time to consider the energy you're conserving for the second half of the race. There is no second half. There is only time to race, hoping you can hold your form together long enough to hurt in the moment. You run strong at the start, mustering the resolve to hang on the middle, throwing yourself forward over the last part of the race. Just as water finds its level, your race finds its pace. Unless you force yourself, that pace is beneath you. Of course, it hurts. That's why it's called racing.

You can do better. Put in the time. Run consistently week after week. Find the day to run fast on the bike path. Break up the distance through running on a track once and awhile. Run a quick run with a faster friend. Run the weekend longer run with a final couple of miles at a sustained faster clip. Then, find another 5km and see what's there.

A road 5km isn't always flat nor is the course always hilly. Race day can be extremely hot or other weather elements may be at play. Despite all that, it is a race. It is your race; make of it what you will. Run gently into the morning. Pound the pavement or trail until you can't breathe. Your call. The race is a gift, given to you by someone willing to sponsor it, arrange the setup, the shirts, the water stops, the awards, and the course, all of which convinced you to come race.

Long after you finish, you will reflect on your race, your effort, thinking of the parts you raced well, and where you ran yourself short. You ran that race for yourself. You know when you're pleased with the effort and when you've left yourself wanting. Those close to you, encouraging you in recognition of your running don't ponder whether you succeeded or failed. You do that.

We hit the three-mile mark together, in close proximity to each other's elbow. If he didn't know I meant business before this point, he knew it now. He grunted and I grimaced. He accelerated and I sprinted the old man sprint. He slightly mis-stepped and I barely finished in front of him. Turns out he was two years younger. I beat the course record for our age group. By a second.

Racing sucks. I race again in a couple of weeks.