

Endorphin Gone Rogue

The three of us shared the bench overlooking the canyon just below from where we'd finished our run, the marine layer's cooling, wet air washing over us on another temperate, pleasant early morning. The bench rested just above the steep sandy hill we had each separately just climbed. The steep quarter-mile hill concluding our run in the canyon along ridges and single track trails with short steep climbs, dirt tracks covered in river rock, and soft loam, was a reason to walk up to its apex. We were spent.

The course was out and back, filled with at least 4.25 miles of five steps of flat footing, followed by undulating short and steep rises complete with crevices from rain eroding the single track, river rocks of various sizes jutting out, leading to a crest of the short uphill, blending into a short, steep downhill, filled with the danger of slipping on loose dirt, tripping on a river rock, twisting an ankle, knee, or falling from a misstep in the crevices, leading to another short flat section before repeating the up and down, again and again, each mile after each mile.

The run started off nicely enough: wide rock-strewn sand dirt on a well-worn path leading slightly down towards the west. Roughly a mile in, the terrain became shaded from wither manzanita and taut, thin oaks, along with assorted bushes, including poison ivy and the like. Just as quickly, the running stride shortened, adapting to the uneven, undulating terrain on a trail that squeezed into a single track of hard-packed dirt, vicious rock, and skidding. Running along the narrowing trail led to intense focus to stay upright, not misstep, not fall, and keep up.

I became fixated on moving as quickly as I could, locating danger just ahead of my next stride, ascertaining in an instant whether the rock-filled edge of the path was safer than the little grand canyon traced right down the middle of the trail. Take a step, lift the knee, find the dirt spot to land the next step, avoid the rock, stay away from the deep eroded section, lift the other knee, find the safe spot, avoid the trail's edge leading into the brush below, take a quick glance ahead to find the next up that leads to a steeper down, make the foot plant, lift the knee, find the next best footing, steal a look around the path, try to enjoy the quiet serenity of the canyon on an ocean-cooled, overcast morning, find the rocks, look for the flat spot, avoid the eroded mini-canyons.

This was my existence for much of the running route. Occasionally, I would hear a voice telling me what he had discovered from his runs on this route, the occasional jackrabbit, mountain bikers, other runners, the various trailheads we were passing or would pass before turning around. In response, I would hear my gargling an affirmative, pretending focus on the conversation when I couldn't do more than get to the next awful short and steep incline, upright.

The run had not been my idea. Had I been told beforehand that for each mile we ran the footing would be uneven, over the endless short little hills requiring short bursts of grunting over treacherous inclines and perilous declines sprouting up over and over again throughout the two canyons connected by a terrifying ridge, I wouldn't have agreed to run it. Most likely my

predisposition against such a course is precisely why I wasn't told ahead of time. No one wants to run with a whiner.

I followed behind, carefully. I followed behind as self-protection, not only because I did not know the shortcuts or the longer flats that avoided only some of the damned inclines. I stared at the ground just ahead of me, spying the rocks to avoid and the soft spots upon which to step. Time was not relevant; no falling or slipping was the priority. Occasionally, I would hear just ahead of me a warning of a more difficult section approaching. Inwardly, I mumbled to myself how I wasn't surprised. Outwardly, "Okay!"

We passed what turned out to be the first of three trailheads, gravel parking lots occupied by one or two cars complete with adjoining camping ground restrooms, no running water, a picnic table or two, and flat ground, sans rocks and ruts. It was nice.

Quickly after passing the trailhead, we plunged into more of the same rock-strewn, rut-washed single track, complete with more steep ups and steeper downs on our path to the middle trailhead. This one was empty of cars and devoid of water. We didn't stop and we certainly didn't turn around to go back. that would have been too easy.

Now over three miles into the run, the first sensation of fatigue arrived. Just a hint, nothing more than that. I did notice the terrain was flatter, the vegetation more lush, and the trail smoother. This is when I began looking for snakes in the grass. Still, there were a few more steep inclines accompanied by steeper declines, with the requisite river rocks threatening my ankles and ruts that never ended, with slippery tiny dirt gravel atop the soft sandy dirt, which could cause a slip and a fall and some painful bleeding. Oh yes, this was fun. Because I am a professional, I can try this at home.

Then, just for fun, we passed under a main road, held up by columns over an actual river that was mostly dry. Mostly. The edge of the shallow riverbed was completely covered in river rock. Who knew? I didn't run that crossing. I took one long look at the path to the riverbed and announced I was walking. No sliding on my arse or faceplanting for me.

The runners, bikers, and dogwalkers had not compacted that section to a safe passage. Getting through that dumped us out onto the turnaround trailhead once we got up a 10-step steep hill. This trailhead had restrooms, semi-filled parking lot, and water fountain, from which I gulped my usual 15 sips. I had a brief moment to gaze up to the sky and the surrounding area, breath in the marine layer filled air. Then, a nudge and we were heading back the way we came. Oh, goody.

The same routine back to the start as out to the turnaround, glance down to the ground just past my last step, find the rocks jutting out from the soft sand/dirt, find the winning footing to place my next step, quick glance ahead and around me just to see where we were, knowing we were running somewhere. I just didn't know where. The return repeated my hyper-focusing over the ominous ups leading to treacherous downs, remaining steep, sloped with ruts that had become even deeper from when I last ran up, over, and down them just earlier on the run. Dried up

channels for rainwater, smooth, rounded rocks still strategically positioned to protect the sun-drenched sand, loam, and dirt. I was having none of it.

I'd been the trailing runner throughout the first hour of this run, both because I didn't know the way and my way of respecting my host. Well, those reasons and I didn't want to be alone if I fell into a deep ravine. Funny thing, though. The further into our return by retracing our steps, the lighter I felt. We weren't running fast. Our pace was easy. Pace is not a standard on a trail run. Survival is paramount. Trail running serves a physiological purpose in compelling the complete use of all the running muscles, ligaments, tendons, economy of form, efficiency in stride, balance, and a healthy dose of self-induced fear of falling.

Trail runs serve a more significant purpose in providing a major dose of easy running in our overall program. We read that easy runs allow faster recovery from harder efforts, that we cannot force our pace on consecutive days that make up a week, that our bodies appreciate the gentler pace. We know from experience our easy runs have a positive effect, enhancing our faster running paces on the other running days. We've learned we will ignore those readings and our experience at the first opportunity. Hence, trail runs with severe undulations in terrain tend to drill home the need for running slowly. But there are times . . .

On our way back, I recalled we would go up and over a meaningful hill, steeper and more slippery than the others, leading to a more pleasant path back to where we started, ignoring that we still had the long, narrow ridge to pass over. While the ridge was an uncategorized climb, the meaningful hill washed out to a category 3. We slopped our way up the meaningful hill, radar getting us safely down to the bottom before recrossing a small footbridge leading to a shall, wide incline to the ridge. My legs, having run now well over an hour at a gentle clip, came to life. They were itching to go.

The three of us have been friends for almost 30 years. We met through an old and now long forgotten running club. We have run long, short, and medium routes together, traveled to races, run relay races together, got each other through some tough moments, attended each other's weddings, became annual right-of-passage friends at Spring Training beginning with the new millennium, and we share laughs more often than not. Those descriptions doesn't really do our tripartite friendship justice.

We have a timeless texting string, dating back to some time after Apple came out with the first iPhone iteration. The text string exists, not because we are iPhone fanboys, but because the device allows for texting and we are creatures of habit. That string jumps at various times through the year, usually starting from some sporting event. None of these texts are deep in meaning. Usually, a ticked off fan moment, followed by a short retort, followed by a shorter reply, ending in an appropriate emoji, leading to a further flurry of texts. Photos of dining out, sitting at a ballpark or stadium are the norm. Showing off children, grandchildren, pets, or scenery are just as likely to appear on the string. Sending a text is a more than a moment's thought; it is a measure of respected friendship, checking in, and saying we care about each other's existence. Nothing can be finer than that.

Interestingly enough, running doesn't come up often on our text string. Because we have running in common and despite the fact of our not aging gracefully, running is part of the fabric of our getting together. We have it down to a science. We awaken early because we are older. Two of us drink coffee to get the day started. The third merely laughs at the first two, commencing that day's colloquial conversation. We drive to a trailhead, somewhere, anywhere we can find a running path without cars alongside. We start out together, scatter after a few miles, reconvening our repartee on the way to cleaning up and brunch. There has to be and always will be brunch. That's a law.

In some past year, we offered up for amendment and ratified that into law that when I felt good on a run I could suggest I was going to stretch it out and meet them back at the car. Sometimes I simply go out further and return quicker, as they sense from my pace on the way out that I'm going to pick up and go. Not that I am fast; I am just a bit faster than them. They don't take umbrage. Frankly, I know they don't care. I'm the one of the three of us that trains for a marathon or a shorter race. I am the one that runs six days a week. One of us rips and roars his way. Another is working on his all-consuming startup. Then there's me with nowhere else to go but on a run. So no, they don't care when I pull away. We each know where to finish.

Two miles from the base of hill where we started, having just dropped to the bottom of the Cat 3 climb, I eased up to run aside the leader of the run. Light breathing from the effort was all that was spoken and even that was in hushed tones. I was waiting. There are moments on a run, a good run, when you know you can go. Doesn't happen every run but it does reveal itself more often than not. Ofttimes it is not a great increase in pace. Those times are when the body has warmed up to your current ability. You feel comfortable, relaxed, and good to go. But sometimes . . . it is time to go. Mentally, your mind catches up with the running shape you're in and the hammer falls, the pace accelerates, and you are gone.

Just before the bottom of the perilous, narrow ridge, open to the freeway below, and without a whole lot of room for error, I hit the go button. I pressed up the ridge, despite my uneasiness in my fighting for balance through the ruts, the rocks and the slippery slope. Running faster with every stride, my goal coalesced on the uphill. I wanted to run fast for the shape I was in and I was in good enough shape to really go. Surviving getting through the downside of the ridge, I ran into and out of the hairpin corner with soft dirt and no rocks, a perfect blend from thousands of mountain bikers carving out the corner at fast speeds. I ran quickly into the small copse of gnarly woods, racing solo over a dismembered footbridge teetering hard to the east. Three quick steps led into a shaded path, flat in elevation, sure of footing, with rocks few in number and spaced out. I was gone.

Running is full of moments like this. The hope is that such a moment arises in a race. No effort felt in the ever-quickening pace, just consistently increasing speed for the moment. But there are those runs, alone or with a group, when it is simply time to go. I don't fight those moments and I don't care how long they last. In terms of my running, I live for those moments. I'm not running anyone else's pace. I am running. I don't think. Thinking would just get in the way. Reveling in the sense of speed, my brain merely cataloging the challenge and my legs straining at the bit to go ever faster, I am in "go time."

I am older now. My fast is unlike anyone else's because my fast is slower than anyone else. The feeling is the same. I am running fast, for me. I am certain I appear stiff-legged, with hints of past ability. I know I appear foolish because I passed so easily by younger versions of me. When I run fast, long ago or now, I feel the excitement within me, sparked by a neuron switch in my brain that tells me, "go!" So, I do. For as fast as I can run and for as long as I can hold that fast. The joy of my running is that I don't need permission.

Coming out of the mini-canyon leading away from the ridge, I knew I had a long path on the first river bed we traversed on our way out. Passing through a softer running area devoid of river rock, I glanced back. I was alone. The hammer dropped and I was off! The rocks no longer threatened me. I scoffed at their existence, following the narrow beaten down path in the middle of the river bed, searching for smooth running at a top-end speed. I knew I was going close to race pace, but I didn't look down at my watch. I didn't know exactly where the finish was, that point where a trail sign gave distances just where we came off of the steep sandy hill. Every upwards canyon I passed had a trail but no signage. I pushed onwards.

Realizing I had moved into efficient running form, the legs more at a 90-degree angle, the arm swing short and at the waist, I had found critical velocity for the morning. Barely touching the ground, gliding over and along the riverbed and the rocks of various sizes and groupings, I had reached my sweet spot, feeling much like a batter when he connects with a pitch on the barrel of his bat, the ball going straight, fast, and far. Seamless and effortless, I ran towards the unseen signage.

I located the sign just as two runners passed me going the other direction. That was my finish line for the day. Running up the steep sandy hill wasn't going to accomplish anything by more slipping and epitaph spewing. I waited for my companions. It was a long wait. The marine layer melted into the day, the jackrabbits curried, the birds chirped along their way, my sweat drying itself out. My legs covered in caked on dirt, I knew the cleansing shower followed by brunch would be satisfactory. The morning was grand. That morning's route was fun. I still felt light.

We all eventually finished, with only me walking up the steep sandy hill. Not yet ready to throw ourselves into the car, we stopped at a bench that was now shaded from the bright morning sun. The temperature was perfect for inward reflection of the run, outward exclamations over how challenging the canyon trails were. Sharing the bench, gazing out to the vista the view from the bench offered, we enjoyed each other's company, laughing loudly at the folly of the day's run. Before long, the day's banter recommenced. A comment was made about how impressive was this morning. We are runners, after all.

Getting into the car, I offered up that perhaps we could run that, again, tomorrow.