

How Bad

The race between my alarm and the cat is set the night before, with the cat usually being the first to wake me up at o'dark thirty. In reality, I'm already awake, too zoned in to sleep in and too nervous to sleep any longer. It's time to run. I want this morning's run bad.

I'm that person who wakes up with the dawn, a lark. I'm also that person who stays awake long after the sun goes down. My circadian rhythm works best in the summer months, except on Mondays. On that day, I'm exhausted long before the sun goes down. I discovered that summers in the Northwest are best for me: early to rise and late to sleep. Northwest winters are less than ideal for me, but I digress.

Right now, I'm that person in search of coffee, any coffee. Staggering from the bedroom through the living room and into the kitchen, wiping sleep-filled eyes, I sense the coffee's location rather than see it in the lightened darkness, cat walking just in front of my toes. There is a daily dance between the two of us. He thinks I'm walking towards a door that leads to the outside, but he doesn't know which one, so he tries to guess. I'm just in search of a cup.

Like the one I left next to the coffeemaker, still containing a portion of yesterday's coffee. I heft the carafe from its docking port, mentally weigh way remains, pour half into the cup, placing the carafe back into its cradle while I turn towards the microwave. Opening the nuker door, placing the cup on rotating plate's edge, I shut the door before hitting the one-minute button, knowing I'll stop the process at :50 seconds. It's not a full cup.

I left half of yesterday's coffee for her, when she awakens long after I've left, so that she has coffee to drink while making a new pot. The cat will harass her until she lets him out, the birdfeeders going onto their respective hooks, while he sniffs away all of the previous night's scents. Eventually he'll follow her from a safe distance from her taking care of the landscaping, pruning her, digging there, always perfecting the appearance of the vast array of summer plantings accompanied by the annuals.

I set my cup down, quietly shut the microwave door so that her slumber is not disturbed. Ofttimes a heavy sleeper, the princess with the pea in the mattress issue has nothing on her should the microwave beep its completed time. Having successfully accomplished that task, gently grasping my cup's curved handle, I head to the bonus room, in the semi-darkness, having learned to over exaggerate the lifting of my feet. Semi-tripping, spilling the coffee from the cup, surprising the cat, only ticks her off. No reason to needlessly disturb her slumber.

Arriving at the first of many appointed rounds for this morning, after placing the cup on the long table, I turn on soft music and a lamp from which soft light emanates. I sit. Finding an article on a website that catches my mind's eye, I lift the cup to sip as I begin reading. Not too long a read, just long enough to allow the coffee to infuse me with wakefulness and an invigorated brain. The article finished the morning's run clothing are located. Time to get moving.

Running shorts that I know are comfortable for this morning's long run in the early heat and high humidity. A running shirt, light in weight and color, with enough holes to keep Denmark busy. Double-layer socks that go just over the ankle bones, which will manage the sopping wet awaiting them. Comfortable running shoes designed for ease of wear for a 16-mile run or 2 hours and forty minutes, whichever comes first. Today, the mileage will win out.

Wait. Coffee works. I'll be right back.

That necessary task accomplished, water bottles filled last night are retrieved from the fridge, placed into the running bag, along with dry clothing for afterwards, and the necessities of the run, including gels, a runner's hat, and sunglasses. After 44 years of running, this process is almost second nature. Almost. Two more running shirts, both sleeveless, are placed in the bag, along with three hand towels used exclusively for running. Normally, one shirt is worn and only one to two towels are needed. Today is not a normal day.

Now 30 minutes past o'dark thirty and the morning's current temperature is 78 degrees and climbing. The dawn's humidity level is 95-percent and holding. The dew point – that temperature below which dew forms – is 76. I'm not going to see wet grass today and there is no rain in the day's forecast. Research and experience tell me that whatever pace I run this morning, on a much cooler fall day I could expect to be almost a minute per mile faster. Most runners, forget nonactive persons, would bag the effort of running today. I'm not them. I have a plan for this morning's run. I want this run bad.

Regardless of what I want, this is going to be close to the "this run sucks" stage.

Yes, throughout the run I will be wetter than had I run in a torrential downpour. My running togs will be drenched. I will change my shirt twice. my socks will feel heavy inside my soggy shoes. So what? There are few perfect running days during a Mid-South summer and those few are rare. This morning is not a perfect running day. I want this bad.

The morning's weather during the run will change: the morning will grow warmer, muggier, and less forgiving. There will be no wind, much less a breeze. As long as I take my nutrition every five miles, staying properly hydrated while running in the

shade of the bike path along the river's side, I should be good. Those are my positive thoughts in my attempting to make chicken salad from chicken crap, or my illusion that I can succeed on day not meant for success.

This run will be a solo effort by me. None of the usual suspects will be joining me. They are each either out of town or running on their own. And not one of them is intending to run as long or as far as I am. But then, they have running talent. They don't need to train diligently as I am in the summer heat. I suspect they run in their sleep, gaining the power and speed needed to race fast while they dream. My dreams are filled with running, without my gaining any strength. Just doesn't seem fair. But I want this.

Taking out the cat litter, grabbing the towel seat cover, unfurling the flag, getting into the car and rolling up the window cover, I inert the charger for the watch, check the idiot lights on the dashboard, look for nonexistent traffic, and head out to the trailhead for the run. By the time I arrive, park, hide the wallet, the cellphone, and the running bag, the sun has found the tops of the trees. I knew it was hiding, waiting for its friends, the overnight heat and humidity, to take effect. Those two are very effective.

The plan: run the first five plus miles at 65-70-percent of my heart rate, ending that portion of the run at the car. After changing my shirt and taking nutrition, head on out for another five plus miles at 75-80-percent heart rate, ending back at the car. After changing my shirt and taking nutrition, run the last five plus miles at 80-85-percent of my heart rate, finishing at the car. After that, call it a day. What? You expected more?

Have you run 16 miles in gawd awful morning heat after a night that didn't cool down, along with morning humidity that sops you of running speed and strength and your running attire with complete wetness? Studies have shown you won't run to your ability. You won't run at your normal training pace. You won't find any part of the run to be enjoyable. And knowing you, you won't run.

I've run in that soup. Every summer since I moved to the Mid-South. Mid-May to Mid-September, or longer on either end is a challenge. I am not a fan. But I've tried running on a treadmill for an entire summer. Other than July when the Tour de France is on, treadmill running is miserable day after day, week after week, month followed by another month and another after that. Reality is to embrace the disgusting weather, lean into the higher effort and the reduced pace, and get through it. Day by day, never looking beyond the next day.

Deduced from numerous medical and scientific studies we benefit from merely attempting to run in the summer heat. We gain more efficient blood flow, a greater

ability to sufficiently cool ourselves, reduce blood lactate, increase our skeletal muscle force, and make us faster when colder weather arrives. Bottom line: summer running makes you tougher when your racing matters. Getting to fast through summer running is less than ideal.

A mid-fall marathon is planned for me. three months out, today is the first of several long-run steps in the preparation. Having raced over 50 marathons, I've learned through turbulent travail's and numerous errors.

These long runs cannot be too short. Once a week 12-mile runs will not prepare you for the last six miles of the marathon. However, a 12-mile run once a week added to long run once every two weeks works well enough. Neither should the long runs be dull or monotonous; running at the same pace for 16-20 miles week in and week out just sucks the joy out of you. They cannot be races. 20 miles at your marathon goal pace is not conducive to successful race pacing.

The long runs can include tempo running or with segments faster than most of the long run. They can include variety. Sometimes running every mile with a swift quarter followed by a slowish three-quarter mile finish into the next mile is fun. Or changing to a faster pace for the second half of the run works well. That pace change can occur through a focused push of the pace or through effort. Today, the run's pace change was through effort. That is summer running.

No pressure in the first five miles. Let the legs find their rhythm at the pace created from maintaining a low level heart rate. Trusting in the pace becoming consistently easy, this is not unlike how the first third of a marathon race should feel for an elite runner and for those of us following. For me, the easy pace includes dropping from a high stepper relying on a leg kick to a runner utilizing the power of his hamstrings and quads. In other words, drop my rear.

In the second third, a gentle tug of the heart rate upwards creates its own efficiency, noticeable in the lower mile splits, the efficiency of breath, and the feel of flow. In these miles, there is the arrival of the smooth, shown by the flicking of the ankles, the relaxed shoulders, the soft sound of my breathing. In the shade on a heated morning, alone with the deer alongside the path, there is nothing else interfering with the pace.

In the concluding five mile segment, the heart rate pushed as close as possible to the planned edge of the run, focusing on maintaining efficient strides, relaxed gliding, steady breathing, all with a slight smile in the effort, the pace picks up. It is not race pace. It is long run pace, earned despite the heat. So much better than the usual shuffle at the end. It's upbeat.

I planned this result. I daydreamed this run. I worked hard beforehand in reducing the pressure of running for this long on this hot morning. Knowing there will be more such days to face before there aren't, today was important. There are other weekly runs not requiring thought, much less planning. Today's run is not one of those days. This run sets the tone, drawing the baseline. I don't flippantly train for a marathon. Not with Boston as the prize. I want this bad.

Only so many days, only so many long runs. Each had best be run to advantage. Just breathing is good. Breathing through evolving running effort is better. Improving running efficiency through adverse heat is what I'm given. I'm making the best of it and today was a good start. Tomorrow will carry that start to another sweltering day full of focused effort, delayed payoff being down the road.

Come race day, I'll have left behind summer-fueled smelly running shoes, memories of running in stifling heat, long, lasting gulps of freezing water, and a toughness to see me through the marathon on a cool day. As I've said, I want this bad.