

Patience hell

[From a famous cartoon, the drawing showing a man in shredded clothing, grasping the sandy ground, grimacing in pain as he attempts to reach the watering hole just in front of him, his face parched from the high desert sun. Directly above him are two vultures, ominously circling. One is carrying a high-back piano, informing the other vulture, "Patience, hell! I'm gonna kill me something!"]

The cat and I arise in the pre-dawn darkness covering our house. The cat owns the house, we just rent out a room we share with him. This morning, my alarm beats his morning wail by a minute. The cat and I stagger towards the kitchen. Robotically, I open the cupboard door, locate a cream-colored porcelain coffee cup, simultaneously grasping the carafe that still has coffee from yesterday. The cat walks staunchly to the porch door, impatient to go outside. I heat the poured coffee in the microwave, impatiently waiting the obligatory short time to garner heated coffee.

This morning is a workday, a school day, a day filled with appointment and chores. All that will wait. This morning is midsummer weekday training run designated in the training schedule. It is one run closer to the mid-fall marathon. Similar to most summer days, there is a fine line between being merely wet from perspiration and uncomfortable from the humidified heat and becoming a fried egg on the running path. Neither is pretty but the fried egg image is more unpleasant.

I sip my coffee, feeling my body slowly finding life in itself. Jumping onto the breakfast nook table to be beside me, the cat gives up being allowed out in the remaining semi-dark. A glance to the outdoor thermometer while the cat receives the required attention shows 80-degrees, 95-percent humidity, a dew point of 76. I know running this morning will be less than ideal. My choice.

Having quickly reviewed last night the planned run for this morning, I appreciated the need to get moving along before the sun woke up. The first cup was quickly replaced by a second only half as full, heated appropriately before moving to the powder room – proving coffee works – on to changing into running togs, cleaning the cat's litter box, packing the after-run clothing, filling the water bottles, adding towels, and the day's running hat alongside the morning sunglasses. Time to go. The cat settles down on the rug for a nap.

10 weeks from the marathon. 70 days is a long time, sufficient time to prepare. Or so you would think. That is not how a runner thinks, just ask any runner who has trained for a marathon. Their response is remindful of Goldilocks: 16 weeks is long enough; 12 weeks is perfect; short than that, every day closer to the marathon requires two more days. The training block is just never quite right. The marathoner's training lament and bemoaning can be endless.

Shoes tied, key in shorts, small water bottle in hand, I start the morning's run just as the sun begins its peekaboo over the eastern horizon. Instant pressure on my chest just moments into the run reminds me that summer is here to stay. I do a mental checkoff of my physical well-being: legs feel good, breathing is not yet labored, the air is breathable, I have a sensation of a bit of zip available this morning. I hope I can hold that for 8.25 miles with a mile tempo segment, a 1.25-mile tempo, and a finishing 1.75-mile tempo back to the car.

I decide to first get through the first two miles before fretting any further.

My fall marathon is in a small rural town in a small rural state limited in participants. Race a small marathon in a rural town nestled in a rural state, where you've never been, knowing that by mile three you are not going to see another runner for a very long time. You are alone, or at least it will seem like you are running solo. Race adrenaline may be coursing through your entire body, but just as every other runner that morning, there is no immediacy in the race. It's just you, yourself, and you all running together. No one else alongside to share the load. Just how trained are you in racing yourself mile upon mile for 26 miles and a bit.

That's my mindset for this morning's run. No one is standing along the running route, cheering me onwards. No one will be waiting at the car, congratulating me for my solo effort. No one cares if I ran with the mental tenacity needed to meet the morning's goal. But I will be the one running along the route. I will be cheering, cajoling, and applauding myself for my morning's accomplishment. Any self-congratulation will come from me and it will be well-earned. I care if I am sufficiently strong for this morning and for race day.

Time is the key.

Time in running. Time running by yourself. Time running with running friends. The time you measure towards your race day goal. The time improvement you notice in your marathon training block. The extra time needed in the height of the summer heat, humidity, and dew point to just get from the start of your run to its finish. Always time is the key, especially when you slowly come to realize the most important element in your training is the time taken up with thinking by yourself while you're running.

Distance running is a thinker's sport. Marathon training is a thinker's delight and a robotic runner's nightmare. We don't have the luxury of running every day with a likeminded runner, much less in the middle of a running group. We have ourselves. We train to race well, not realizing through the training we are better to ourselves. As I said, distance running is a thinker's sport.

The mile three start finds me in good form, running over the pavement with the lightest of touches from my running shoes, the arms relaxed, the face placid. Mile four is a smooth transition to the second tempo. The last part of mile six leads into a short reprieve before the ultimate segment. Finished, drenched in sweat from the rising heat, this morning's run will be a good step to the next run.

Actually, I know time is not the key. The mindset is the key in working through time alone, running at a sustainable pace, acceptable for the race I anticipate running just weeks away. Between this morning and then, I have miles to run, more to run in a sustained effort, many more taken up pondering whether I am running patiently to be ready. Neither a team of draft horses nor an unruly mob will slow my mind from getting ahead of myself. I don't own horses and I don't see any mob on a daily basis. That leaves me fighting with myself to relax. That sounds good, but is so far from my reality.

At some point, if patience doesn't work for me, I know I can act accordingly. Just ask the cat or the vulture on that matter.