

## Pick Your Poison

Twins.

One with an optimistic life's view.

The other was cynically pessimistic.

Drove their parents to distraction.

In the pessimistic child's bedroom, the parents placed new toys, games, and presents, covering the floor.

In the optimistic child's bedroom, the parents dumped a large load of fresh horse manure in the middle of this son's bedroom.

Informed they each had gifts in their bedrooms, each child went to their rooms to see their gifts. Hearing very little after 20 minutes, the parents peered into the bedrooms to see how the twins liked their gifts.

They found the pessimistic child sitting in the middle of the bedroom, crying and exclaiming, "I'm just so sad. I just don't know which one to play with first."

Entering the other child's room there was no sign of the child. Then they heard a commotion in the midst of the manure: the child had found a shovel and was digging into the pile. The child looked up exclaiming, "With this much manure, there's got to be a pony here somewhere!"

- *As told to a 13-year old me by his exasperated mother*

Running is a grind.

That's not say grinding is a problem. I'm not tilling the soil. I am not foraging for food, shelter, or any other basic sustenance. I own my house and I own my own life. I am not working a job I need but loathe. I am free to use my own intellect and experience to assist others. We live in a time when we have time. I have time to use up as I please. I look forward to living my life, filled with variety, love, friendship, and fatherhood. But not every day is as good as the day before it or the day that follows.

Living is a grind. We arise in the morning. We shower, we eat, we commute, we do the morning work. We lunch, we work some more, we commute. We dine again, we relax, we go to bed. That's not to say this is a problem. We earn some of our life's joys from the fruits of our work grind. We fill in the remainder of a day in conversations with our close friends, our work friends, our spouse, our children, our parents. We are excited to see what society offers. Then, we arise and do it all again.

Actually, running is no different. In summer months, we arise god-awful early, we commute to our run or go out the door, we run a route or workout that we choose for the day, finished, we wait for the summer sweat to dry, we go home. Somedays, we run solo, alone in our thoughts and effort. Other days, we join with others, sharing the effort and the post-run endorphins. We chose to run almost every day. That's not to say this is a problem. We've learned we are leaner, clearer thinking persons because of running. We earn some of our life's joy from the fruits of our runs.

Running is only a grind when we place too much emphasis on one day's run.

There are dates etched into each of our brains.

For me, at my current age, those remembered events start November 11, 1963 and include moon landings, world series victories, assassinations, world track records, wars, births, weddings, viruses, passings, and the days running slowed. The latest one was August 15, 2020, when seemingly effortless running disappeared. There is no known reason other than age. The first time in my mid-thirties saw sub-five minute race pace vanish. I adjusted; finding I was still competitive at a different level. The second time saw sub-20 minute 5km races become a memory. I again adjusted; learning to race again amidst new competitors. This time, slowing hurt more; keeping up with the running kids ended.

For the almost four years prior to that middle of COVID year, I had found a running groove giving me happiness. I cruised in my training pace, reveled in my race results, and most importantly, could hang with the group whenever I chose. That left, without a warning, without a thank you, without a rational reason. Initially, I trained harder, much harder than I should have trained for my ability. That attempted exhausted me. I trained slower and that training exhausted me. I used a training block and blended both efforts. Without rhyme nor reason, I endured persistently consistent running. Racing results were less than ideal.

All that aside, nothing is worse than showing up to run with others, hanging on for the first mile – the warmup mile – before watching the others run away. Realizing they were not yet picking up the pace, reality told me what I already knew: I had no faster running pace to offer. Nobody wants to slow down to run a slow pace. I don't want to run with someone who runs my slow pace, knowing they should be and could be running so much faster. That realization, along with thinking it, and typing it just now, doesn't equate to acceptance of that fact. That takes more concerted effort on my part.

Yesterday was a shared weekend run in the middle of the year's hottest month. The weather people gave us a gift: dry, early morning temperatures at 60 degrees, low humidity, no wind, and a very low dew point. No excuse to not run at a pace usually reserved for the fall. That is what everyone else did. They ran the pace I expected to run. I didn't. I ran 45 seconds per mile slower than I anticipated running. Fatigue did not play into the run. Neither did lack of proper training. I ran the long run, alone and solemn.

I . . . just . . . am . . . too . . . slow.

Deep within our DNA is the ability to deny. We deny ourselves instant gratification for the anticipated greater result: "I know I'll race faster if I don't run all out the day before the race." Ignoring the result of our actions is denial personal to each of us: "but running so fast the day before felt so good; I don't understand why my race was so disappointing." "If I just run faster in my daily running, I'll be able to run as fast as I did when I was younger," is absolute denial. Running is for all ages, youth to aged. That doesn't guarantee the same pace in aging. That fact can be frustrating.

Frustration is the same side of the coin as anger. Put straightforwardly, running 12 by 400 meters on the track with a half-lap jog in between feels the same, whether an 18-year old runs those repeats or a 67-year old completes the same task. The frustration is the glance of the watch telling the 67-year old that she is slower; the watch glance merely lets the 18-year old that she needs to pick up the pace. Anger comes into play when the older runner realizes her running these quarters will not repeat her younger self's pacing, no matter how much she bargains with herself.

We bargain with ourselves internally every day, almost by the minute: "I'll go for a run just as soon as I finish this task." Occasionally, bargaining works well enough such as, running the penultimate repeat just a titch faster than all the others to end the workout. More often than not, it's an excuse to not address reality. "I know pushing my pace beyond the pace I can run right now will get me further," is nothing more than offering to give something you don't have. It's self-bargain in the worst form. When that doesn't work, sadness takes over.

A despondent runner is a miserable companion: "Why can't I keep up with you? It used to be so easy." The sad runner who becomes a despondent runner eventually finds a running cave, away from others, training in the self-forced solitude of the lonely runner. Once that transpires, the sad, despondent, lonely runner is now a depressed athlete. "Nothing I've tried makes me faster," he'll say. "I suck at running, so what's the point?" by now, however, he's fully engaged in self-talk. He's removed himself from his closest confidants. When he realizes his running isolation isn't the solution, he can retake the initiative, rejoining his tribe.

He has found a new reality, one that still involves running. His running is still that: running. He feels the same when he runs, he just knows it's slower. The hours taken with running in a week are the same hours he absorbed when he was younger, those current miles taking in fewer miles. Removing complaining from his social DNA, he accepts he'll have a great cup of coffee or after-run brunch, describing what he saw on his run to the others who finished long before him. His new routine still includes lacing up his running shoes, wearing the clothing he enjoys, starting the run with others, picking up the newer, slower pace, finishing alone. There are worse things in life, such as not running.

Lamenting is useless, but not always. It is a means to resolving a loss. I'm passed that stage. That resolution includes an understanding that I never had anything to lament. Any reaction contrary to that realization is merely sympathy. Reality is that I can run. I can run fast for my age and gender. I can run long. I enjoy running. I just can't hang with the other running kids my age.

A complaint means something isn't right. Complaining by itself is useless. Complaining with a solution is useful. A solution is a means by which a complaint may be resolved. Not every solution works to resolve the complaint. There is, however, always a solution, even if temporary. In this instance, I'm going to get up in the morning. I'm going to drink a cup of coffee before donning running attire. I'm going to drive to my Monday morning workout location I've used for this training block. I'm going to run my workout of 4 x 10:00 at half marathon pace with a 4:00 recovery jog.

I have no laments; I have no complaints. I happily breathe every day and will breathe again, tomorrow. Whether I am no longer the runner I once thought I was, I am a runner. The sultry sweat soaking my running shirt accompanied by the strength built from the power of the run leading to the moment of exaltation in excelling in my own effort are my gifts to me, no different than the joy in finishing a freezing morning run complete with breath visible in the shining stillness of winter. After tomorrow's run, I'll arise the next day and the days following, to run again, repeatedly.

I know how to run solo and how to share running with others. Both are intrinsic to a running life. Each have their moment in the sun. One lets the subconscious mind find solutions; the other allows the sharing of those solutions, leading to still more solutions. And that is life at its fullest in a nutshell.