

Placebo

I am a Type 2 Diabetic, first diagnosed almost 20 years ago.
I am an avid distance runner beginning in college.
The two are a tough mix.

A mile is measured at 1,760 yards, or 5280 feet. One hundredth of a mile in feet is 52.80 feet. Running a five-minute per mile pace equates to covering that 1/100th of a mile in three seconds. Over a 10kilometer race course, every mile measured out to be 0.99 of a full mile, which is 18.60 seconds saved in running that course. For a young runner who can run 5:00 per mile pace, that almost 19 seconds saved means being considered a 30:00 10K runner or a runner who runs the distance in 31 minutes. Those seconds can define that runner.

Racing a regional 10km, our runner runs fast from the starting gun going off, jostling amongst the eventual leaders for early position. through the first mile split, he notices not only how easy the pace feels but that he is still with the usual suspects leading the race. Through the second mile, his time has dipped below 5:00 pace and he is still with the leaders. Passing the halfway 5km split, he remains tucked in with the dwindling lead group, all running just under 5:00 pace. Just after passing the mile four split, he senses a really good race unfolding and he's in it. With a mile to go, still running below that magical 5:00 per mile pace, he mentally tells himself to go, racing now for a podium finish and a personal best.

Following that "breakthrough" race, our runner "knows" going into any race that he is a sub-5:00 runner, capable of running with the best around.

In my late 40's my thyroid died. It just . . . died.
I am an avid distance runner through my family life and career.
The two are a tough mix.

Another runner, some four decades older than the younger version of himself, now running a half marathon at 8:00 per mile pace on a course that he does not know is short every mile by just 1/100th cuts his finish time by almost 1:05. That is the difference between being a 1:43 half marathoner or a 1:45 finisher. Believing that the mile splits are accurate (they match the time and distance on his GPS watch, heh), he tentatively begins picking up his pace every mile, at first passing throngs of other runners, then passing clusters, then passing onesies and twosies on his way to a very satisfying and pleasing race. He uses that experience to pop a faster marathon time, much faster and easier than he had run in a long while, qualifying him for Boston.

No one tells him that the course is measured short. He believes he's faster. Fast enough to train at a slightly faster pace, to run a slightly faster race, finishing races with a pleasure he'd not known in a long while. like a marathon where the goal is to finish in a Boston Qualifying time over merely finishing unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

He has no reason to believe that he cannot race faster. He has that half marathon to prove his self-worth. He has subsequent race times showing him consistency racing that quicker pace. Because no one has told him he's built his belief system on a mis-marked race course leading to an inaccurate result. He's turned that result into reality. Who now can say his belief is inaccurate? No one.

Without the use of a simple medication in a pill form, a dead thyroid slows a body down, in so many different ways. For a distance runner, this little organ's death is not helpful to the process. Running paces that were once second nature become long lost mental companions and are no longer attained. Forced to accept being frustratingly slow is the new normal.

The pill, offered in a vast array of colors, in miniscule amounts designed to maintain a tight range of life in the thyroid, is really a device used in tricking the brain into believing that the thyroid is alive, eager to go. With the thyroid pill, running freely resumes. You no longer run by yourself out of self-embarrassment. That gliding feeling returns, replacing the ceaseless, slow jogs that you've accepted for so long. Running becomes child's play, again.

Over 40 years of running daily and maintaining running logs of those daily runs show the pattern of my running life. I monitor strides seeking goals. I catalog easy runs, fun runs, tempo runs, track runs, intervals run on roads, trail runs, hilly runs, scenic long runs, ugly long runs, and races. I see the names given for each of the consistently-repeated runs, in the numerous towns I've lived, or to which I've traveled. For the most part, I cherish each of their memories.

There is the infamous out and back on an old railway track, now turned into a pedestrian and bike path, where the group think took over at the turnaround, the pace picking up over the last 3.5 miles until we were breathlessly racing back to the cars. Accompanying that course was always the weekend long run in the shaded and hilly watershed along endless, wide dirt trails, perfect for early morning mountain bikers and packs of runners. And almost weekly there are the track workouts, the intervals run on greenways, and the other organized paced efforts towards personal greatness.

Two years ago, almost to the day, running pace fell off the map, again. Apparently, diabetes 2 cannot be handled with just one drug. Having gone through several, and having altered and realtered the diet so many times, the insulin and the blood sugars not seeing eye to eye, a new old drug is placed in to the mix. It works in evening out on a daily basis, sorta.

I woke up the second morning after starting the new drug mix, went for a run, and found that I could not hold my usual pace. Okay, maybe the summer's heat had something to do with it. The next day, I woke up, went for a run, and found I could not hold my usual pace. By the third day, I knew I had a new pace, and it was slower, uglier, and exceedingly frustrating. My pace now would be almost two minutes a mile slower in training and just under a minute per mile in racing. The paced runs are now slower in pace, the workouts are slower, the long runs are slower, the races are all slower. No consistency can be found from one run to the next in sustained effort. I don't know each day which part of me will show up: the slow, old man or the renaissance in full bloom.

Yes, the latest drug given me to accompany the other two seem to be effective in slowing the adverse effects of my type 2 diabetes. Should I choose, I may once again resume eating whatever I want, though I prefer the incredibly healthy fare I am offered daily within my house. Were I a sedentary man, this would be sufficient a life for me. I'd slowly grow the white man's bowling ball belly, without any tush in support. That's not the self-image for me.

A year later, running was slow enough for me that I resumed running solo. The inner resolve was there, but I had no one willing to run that slow. Needing a qualifying time for Boston, having trained through another hot, humid, and oppressive summer by myself because of how slow I'd become, I raced a late July marathon in the Pacific Northwest. Cool weather on race morning followed my slow, methodical training in the prior 12 weeks. That training was based on heart

rate, keeping the heart rate at a certain easy level most days, pushing into a higher level on others. There is no joy in Mudville running like that, but that won out over the alternative of beating myself up in constantly attempting runs at the “old” pace that I could run just one year ago. Race day was an unexpected carnival ride of too slow for the first three miles, catching up to the needed pace over the next 10 miles, and racing at an ever-quickening pace the second half of the race. Running that day was impressive. I earned a qualifying time for Boston.

That was it. There were no other good training efforts or races for me since that marathon. I’ve not said much about it, except to my endocrinologist. Complaining without a means of resolution is nonsensical to me. Accept it, examine it, review it, fix it. Meeting with my endocrinologist once a quarter, I would explain my increasing frustration and internal anger. “Is this reduced energy base normal?” I ask, every time.

I know I am older; from that, I know I am slowing in all facets of life. What I don’t know is why the running pace would drop off a cliff in just days. Is that normal? Is it the new pill? Is it some other malady or life-threatening challenge within me? Only the shadow knows . . .

During our last meet up, I raised the running concern, again. To my surprise, she suggested I take “a holiday” from using the new pill that I’ve been consuming daily for almost two years. She apparently had taken time to discuss this issue with colleagues, leading her in taking this step as a precursor to replace the new pill or not. I have a month. A month to feel the nonexistent wind gliding over me. A month to cherish the feeling in running consistently fast. A month without boundaries.

Of course, this is August. Running this month gives solid definition to the term “the Dog Days of August.” There is a reason running in the excessive, extended, middle of summer heat is so daunting. We are slower in August. Running in August sucks . . . is less than ideal. Rising before dawn to get in the run before the day’s oppressive heat arrives is more of a challenge this month than in July or June before that. But I do it.

Daily running so far without taking the new pill has given me a freeing effect. Too soon to know definitively whether I can run faster, but there is a mind game beginning that running is smoother, and just a bit easier in effort. Again, this is August. There will be days when the piled up heat and humidity will suck up all the available oxygen, when running outside at any time of the day will be misery. August is what it is.

There will be other days when the air is usable, the shade is useful, and the pace is acceptable. On those days, I can remove summer’s anvil weighing down on me. Then, there will be that half marathon just weeks before the fall marathon. Will the training pace pick up? Will that training pace lead to a faster race result? And can she be saved in time from the oncoming train? I may need to go back on the new pill or a replacement, depending on any adverse effect from being away from the new pill. That’s for another day. Right now, I am free.

Free to day dream, free to run as if I’m running as I was two years ago. I’ve had but a handful of those moments since that time. I want more of those. I want to pretend I can push my pace, run faster more often. Not using the new pill is now the impetus to arise early to run faster and often before that heat sucks the life out of me. I don’t know that the new pill is the cause and that my become slower is the effect. I do know that the effect came along at the same time as the cause. It could be so.

I am now willing to believe.