

## Solo Ventures

It was an enclosed sunroom attached to the back to house my mom rented for she and her three children. It was a 10 foot by 20 foot room with glass halfway up each of the three walls that faced outside. The room was not insulated, which equated to cold mornings in the winter and fitful sleeps in the overnight heat of the summer. Separated from the kitchen immediately adjacent to it, the sunroom was its own little planet in the house's solar system. It was my room and it was perfect for a fledgling young teenage boy.

On Sundays, I would wake up to the first glimmer of morning sun, gently edging itself through the glass on the southeastern side of the sunroom. I would lay still, listening for the gentle flowing sound of the river well below us. There was no back yard, just a straight drop downwards to the riverbank, to which we had to walk down the block and follow a dirt path to then trek over the riverbank to come beneath the house. Knowing I had only a couple of hours before the sun made known its presence with heated authority, I got out of bed.

Turning on American Top 40 on my radio, I proceeded to busy myself with finding all the clothing I'd worn the week before, sorting them into whites and darks, to be washed after my mom and two sisters awakened. I then turned my attention to making my bed (sometime mid-week, the sheets would magically be taken, washed, dried, and returned to their usual position, a miracle), changing into gym shorts, cleaning up my desk, otherwise known as my sunroom floor, start and finish my weekend homework and whatever I had for the next week, and once that was completed, I would daydream. I'm a big believer in daydreaming.

I dreamed of becoming a Major League outfielder. I pondered the thought of holding off being a ballplayer for a college degree. I wondered if now was too early in the morning to call a girl I liked. I missed my dad. All the while, the sounds of mid-70's music led by Kasey Kasem and accompanied by the gentle river's water rushing over the rocks played as my white noise. My Sunday early mornings were the softest part of my teenage week.

After matriculating through the University and after doing the same through graduate school, I found that distance running on a Sunday morning gave my life the same flow of order, reveling in thought, and daydreaming. Ofttimes I was in the

company of like-minded adults, each finding our way towards maturity that only time's passage would give us. But at least once a month, my Sunday runs were my own. And more than a few of those solo efforts were along a beautiful bike path traversing through myriad neighborhoods, the path winding in a serpentine effort to connect all of them over the course of 40 miles. Though I would vary the starting point and the finish, the runs were never longer than 20 miles. That was the rule.

Well into those runs, daydreaming would return. I dreamed of being successful in my career. I wondered if I would ever marry. I pondered what owning a house would be like. All the while, I ran. Early Sunday morning is quiet. The sound of my footfalls, the aroma of early morning coffee joined by eggs and bacon, followed my morning route. No traffic at the intersections that broke up the trail. The occasional passing of another runner or walker. Each part and parcel with my week.

Living now in the belt buckle of the bible belt, my long runs are planned for and completed on Saturdays. Married, child now in his own house with his own wife and children, career winding down, I run those long runs weekly. I start those weekend runs with the running kids, men and women of a certain age, each much faster than myself. Because they are so much faster, those long runs become a run in futility, with me catching a glimpse of their leading pack while I sally forth towards the run's end at a much slower pace. During these runs, daydreaming of being faster is the primary thought winning out over the other more pleasant ones.

But occasionally, a weekend long run is just me, myself, and I. Those runs are a nice diversion from the never ending battle to keep up. The beginning leads from a gentle start to a slow build to a quicker pace over the miles. A natural progression with effort and strength combining into a force of running power. I lead. I follow. There are no interruptions to my long run. I choose to stop for water, or not. I am not compelled to wait for the group to gather. Nor do I have the pressure of catching up to the group because they may be waiting for me.

On those solo runs I daydream. I dream of being faster. I dream of racing faster. I dream of training better, which amuses me because I run eight hours over six days each week. Long ago, that was 65-80 miles a week. Now that equates to 50 miles each week. The effort remains the same. I cannot control the slowing pace, only the effort. I run, my thoughts in harmony with the run. I choose the course for strength, or for quiet, or for speed. And I allow myself to pretend.

While I constantly remind myself as I run to relax my shoulders, slacken my jaw, life my forearms, drop my waist, lift my ankles just a bit, I can only imagine what other runners see when they pass me going the other way, though that is a thought I don't allow myself because I am so busy tweaking each step into the next. This is especially so when I capture a day's run.

Having played team sports into college, which includes practices focused on the team improving in each facet of the game, running is different. I run. Simply getting in the run is a major step in the running process. Speed of the run is secondary. At least that is for me. I've trained slowly and qualified for Boston. I've read of elite runners in running history that have trained slowly, winning Olympic medals and setting world records. For years, I've raced better than I train, though I love the feeling of fast movement on my feet.

This weekend, I had a moment's run that brought to life that feeling from a 16-mile solo run. The late fall air was dry and just warmer than crisp, a morning where the thought of cotton gloves and a thin, long-sleeved shirt passed through my mind. The weekend before I had run a sluggish 20 miles in air so oversaturated that a knife could not have cut through it. With five miles to go, the high but thick cloud cover descended with a fury, heavy, incessant rain falling in a vengeful manner: straight down, overloading the trail, the newly-formed stream rushing over my shoes. I fought to maintain pace with every step, in my mind failing. But that was then.

I ran solo. I drove to the regional park. I set my course, allowing me to return to my car twice on the run for 30-second stops. Ready to go just as the sun lifted over the eastern tree tops, I set out, not knowing what would be my beginning pace. I felt smooth running in my soon-to-be-replaced-but-not-until-after-this-run veteran pair of run training shoes. Heart rate was low, the effort easy. I thought, "this could be a good day." I gently accelerated.

A run in which each mile was just a tick faster than the one before it brings its own singular success. A progressive run breeds confidence in the process. The strength necessary in picking up the pace without slowing down is a precursor to good running things to come. My starting pace is not relevant to my finishing pace when I run like this. The mindset alters from getting in the "time on feet" to "lets see where this takes us." I found out.

I cruised. Halfway into the long run I had already reached my best long run training pace, usually saved for cold winter mornings without ice and no wind when running with the running kids. Those are sweet Saturday mornings, because I can hang onto their tailcoats just enough to push my pace and see them before they turn the next corner. I take my positive reinforcement where and when I can garner it.

This morning, by myself, once into the last five-mile stretch, I focused on another gentle ush of the day's pace to another level. This is a level I hadn't run in a very long time, but that story is for another day. On this day, with the soft clouds lounging high above in various grouped patterns, a stillness joining the soft cool of the morning turning to a muted warmth, the desire to run at that higher level altered the daydream.

With each passing mile, I ticked up the pace. I envisioned holding my own with anyone who happened to be going my direction. My jaw slackened the faster I traveled along the running path, my stride in rhythm with my pace because my waist was dropped, my arms held higher than just above my hips smoothing out my stride, and my ankles lifting. I was in my classic long distance form. I had found the groove in my solo venture.

I wasn't running at race pace; I was running in the moment. No thoughts of work or of chores, or myriad other mental diversions entered my head. Just me, holding serve on the ever-quickenning pace. No need to go too fast. There was the need to hold the pace, under control. The self-talk was how smooth in stride I felt I was running, how easy was increasing the pace in increments without a pause, and the inner joy of running that pace on that morning.

On my way home, I wondered when was the last time I'd run that far by myself in that time with that pace. I looked it up in my yearly running logs. It had been a long time. Accounting for age, that the run have been at least 16 miles, done solo, it had been a very long time. That information gave me warm fuzzies in my chest followed by a gentle moment's relaxed satisfaction that remains.

In two weeks, I'll need another 10 miles of that pace without a break. My running daydreams are now lightly different, more confident from the experience, leading to the expectation that I am prepared to race a Boston qualification. Solo running

isn't always the first choice. But there are those personal benefits. At least for me, this time around.