

Ruts

Having reached the water fountain with accompanying porta potty at the half way point of my run, I heard her coming from the side trail before I saw her. The breathing came hard, steady, and with incredible veracity. With a glance off to my left, I saw her. She was running hard, coming fast upon the water stop, and announcing herself with great authority.

Braking to an immediate stop just steps from the water fountain, using her running shoes to cushion her screeching halt, hands immediately placed on hips, the hard breathing continued, her inhaling the air sounding even harsher than her exhaling her used-up oxygen. Lost in her own recovery, her eyes set firmly on her task at hand, I was invisible to her need to drink water, check her tied shoelaces, glance at her watch before igniting her legs into continuing the ferocious effort that got her to this point.

Her respite was short – earned – but short. She threw herself back towards the main trail. Having silently waited my turn at the fountain, stepping forward and bending at the waist as I turned the fountain's knob to release the water's stream, I heard her not yet too distant hard breathing. She was flat out gone.

I remember my running sounding like hers. My chest heaving, leading the legs in a well-choreographed churning in that powerful rhythm given a distance runner who knows he is when he runs. Those running moments were so relaxed and so intense. I could feel the effort throughout my ribcage, my thighs, and the balls of my feet, each taking part in the thrill of that run. Her effort brought to the forefront of my mind that immense joy in feeling the lungs searing with the sucking in of air and that same air being pushed out just as quickly as it came in.

In another lifetime, he and I dug into the mile-long switchback leading to the top of the well-groomed dirt path, our running shoes barely touching that dry dirt along the shaded gradual incline. First a long, gently uphill into the trees just above the small lake from where we started that led to a sharp left turn leading still further up into the trees, my using that moment to pass him before we reached the next sharp turn, this time to the right.

Just past that second turn, my left foot flinched over a pebble and he took advantage, thumping his legs into the dirt before we approached the next lefthand hook on the trail, still going upwards. He gave me no quarter; I hung onto his shoulder leaning slightly into the hill. That short spurt cost him, but he led into the final right hand pivot just before we crested onto the ridge. He had to have that half-step lead because following our pushing the pace along the flat trail atop of the ridge, I intended to bury him going back down the second set of switchbacks bringing us back to the small lake.

He knew it and steeled himself. The first turn was more of a jump off the ridge and onto the descending path than it was a hairpin turn. I leapt by him, my breathing mimicking a steam engine in full throttle. I leap when I run, being taller, leaner, and a forefoot striker. He dug into the trail's dirt more deeply to keep up, he being shorter, more compact in his stride and a midfoot force with whom to be reckoned. At the next opposite turn, I buried my left leg into the ground like a running back cutting back against the grain in avoiding the cornerback and outside linebacker. He was almost ready to pounce, again.

So long ago, and yet, the memory of our pounding each other into submission on that 2.5-mile loop up to the flat and then down to the designated finish ("See that green sign? Hat's our finish.") before we would do that damned loop again, only faster, is so fresh to me. during the "recovery," hands on hips, trying to bend over just slightly at the waist, the breathing came quick, short, and hard. But similar to Pavlov's dog, we knew when the recovery time was closing down, and we found our way to the official start line for the second loop ("We'll start at that black sign, eventually").

Rarely finishing a full loop in front of him, I settled for changing upon which of his shoulders I would tuck in behind. Content to remind him with every one of his steps that I was right there and was not going away, I relished bothering him. This time, coming around the final hairpin on the downwards switchback, I gathered my form, literally racing past him, finishing ahead of him and closer to the green sign that he could muster. That was that time and those times were far and few between.

Long since time for me to renew that effort on my own. I don't like the alternative. She reminded me that I know how to dig deep for my deep breathing when I do a workout. I don't need to hurt myself; running fast enough is good. It's time.