

Nerves

Feeling their oats one week out from the Honolulu Marathon, the two of them convinced themselves they should run the first part of the marathon course up to Diamondhead, but no further. And boy, did they feel good. So good that they scaled the road up and over into Hawaii Kai, before they realized they would have to return. That short 20-mile excursion at faster than their planned race pace cost them dearly six days later when they jumped aboard the Struggle Bus on their way to a finish, 45:00 slower - much, much slower - than the pace for which I had coached them.

16 weeks' effort wasted in one ill-timed run.

Why do we do sabotage our training and our races in that fashion? More accurate a question: why do we let panic seep in and take over our proper thinking and motivation when it comes to the last few weeks before a long-planned and heavily-anticipated marathon? Is it the inevitable feeling of invincibility derived from the training build up? Does Superman take over our running body, coaxing us into the belief that we can run race a faster pace than that which we have trained ourselves to race?

"But the entire run felt so easy!" they told me four days after their ill-advised long run, at dinner at a finer dining establishment along Waikiki. I could only nod in reply. Telling them that their legs would desert them somewhere on a highway coming back towards Diamondhead when they least expected it. "We just wanted to make certain we could hold race pace," they repeatedly emphasized. I focused on my entry and then my desert. Elite runners take 1:45 to 2:00 in finishing a 20-miler. These two were not elite. They could finish under three hours, but the toll taken on their legs is very different.

In short, they were screwed and they knew it.

When done right, the marathon taper is a treasured part of the plan. 14 weeks of building and holding 10-14 hours running each week, divided over six-seven days, pacing patiently built over that timeframe. Two weeks out, the training drops by 2-3 hours. One week out, the same reduction brings the hours of running before the marathon to 5-8. Truthfully, as long as the training time is consistently reduced, the taper is in place. Rested legs coupled with race magic equates to successful racing.

So why do we ignore going along the proven path leading to matching our marathon goal? For the same reasons we ignore other obvious signs that scream out the danger ahead for ill-conceived choices. We just know better and no one can tell us otherwise. We know that we are faster, therefore, we will race faster than our current training demonstrates we can hold for 26.21 miles. We've all read and heard from other marathon runners that the first (fill in the miles) of the race felt soooooo easy that there was no reason not to believe the ill-chosen pace could be maintained all the way to the finish. In thinking that myself, I've been litter on the side of the road somewhere in the last 10km; I've also passed that same litter made up of those suffering from the same malady.

Don't get in the way of a runaway freight train, loaded with hubris.

I am 14 days out from my latest marathon, in my personal Boston Marathon qualification attempt. I've been successful several times before in these attempts and because I seem to reach my BQ more easily when I race away from my home base, I have long ago taken to calling these attempts a "business trip." Not needing a personal best, I race just fast enough to get under the required qualifying time low enough to ensure I get a race number. Don't need to win; just race fast enough in achieving my goal. I fly or drive, stay one night (pay for two so that I can shower and ease my way out of town), dine solo, race within myself, head home the same way I came. It's the business of getting to Boston Marathon Weekend. It's my business.

In the two weeks immediately prior to racing a marathon, despite following the training plan, running the long runs, pacing the threshold runs, doing the hill work, the search for the remaining hidden gem in last days of training continues in vain. I know better, but I can't help myself. Like a teenager looking for validation, I want something, anything, to show me I am race ready. All the while, the answer is right in front of me.

They were tough as nails and they knew it. They could feel the power oozing through their legs when they arrived in Honolulu. That running strength was foreign to them; they had no idea how to harness that feeling. They had earned that feeling. I just wish they had listened to me and waiting to unleash the fruits of their training until race day. Their horses were happily led to water, whereupon they drowned. I raced under 10 minutes under three hours, I was into Boston. Then waited for them to finish. For. A. Very. Long. Time.

I'm a runner of a certain age, decades of distance running, race training, and racing behind me. I know a little something through personal trial and error. Just a little. One of those

something is gathering up my training log for the current block leading into the reason for this business trip. I see the modest beginning of the block: the hour-long runs and a two-hour weekend run, those weeks leading into the middle weekly building blocks wherein I've put my toe in the water, pushing the paced runs and the long runs. I read the entries, noticing the pacing naturally increasing, the long runs being done consistently, the ever-increasing days wherein the running strength improves. I review the positive results from the races done as part of this training block, short races, intermediate races, longer races. I see the heart rate efforts maintained, all the while with the pace increasing. Then, I see the entry from which I have my hidden gem.

It was a three-hour run. It was an easy 45:00 in the pre-dawn, followed by a moderate hour, leading to a final 1:15 at a pace in which each mile was quicker than the last, to the point that the last hour was run at the projected marathon pace, without my pushing over my limit, with me reveling in each mile accomplished, my form felt smooth, my rhythm was good, and my effort was easy. Most importantly, with my training runs being easy, quicker, and stronger in the weeks following that long run. As is my want, I compared that long run to other long runs in other training blocks. No need to overfill my cup. I'm good.

Worrying over the final two weeks is wasted energy. Pushing the paces in the final days accomplishes little. There is a special feeling emanating from the taper. The taper brings a pause in the fretful run up to the race. I notice the scenery on my runs that I'd been missing in the haste of the training. I catch the aromas of the day. I see the tree within the woods, the flower amidst the landscape, the colorful bird amongst the flock. And I feel the slow but steady injection of added strength in my daily running. I may not be calmed by the taper, but I am stronger for it.

And I know something else. And so do you.

Racing brings a magic unique unto itself. No runner successfully trains the full distance of a race at race pace. That is why we race, to see if we can race faster than we train, for a sustained amount of time longer than we run at that pace when we are training. The two-hour marathon is not accomplished by running repeat 26-milers at 4:34 pace. My race goal isn't met through daily training at over under the needed race pace. In fact, that pace isn't often met in training. there isn't the need.

Watch a golfer, good at her craft, when she is preparing to hit a driver into the stationary golf ball set upon the tee. The practice swing and placement of the club head doesn't quite

meet the ball on the tee, until she swings the driver in earnest. Then, after she reaches back behind her head with the driver, swinging it forward with great force, the driver head meets said ball, ball flies far and straight. Before that swing, the effort is light and practiced. There is no need to meet the ball until the swing matters.

That's racing.

"Wow!" they each exclaimed after they had suffered enough lying in the grass. "How did you run that course so fast?! We couldn't have done that." I answered that I could because I hadn't left my race on Diamondhead a week earlier. I kept myself in check, ran the pre-race runs easy, waiting for the race. I then explained the secret to race pace during the race is patience, and that, patience is hard. That, too, takes training. Don't run fast or hard when you are not supposed to run fast or hard. Those workouts have their place in the training block. No need to force them.

I love the magic racing brings. I am faster than I train. I am more relaxed than I train. I am lighter on my feet, smoother in my breathing, easier on myself. Race magic takes away the nerves, replacing worry through focused effort. The physical effort isn't easier, just faster in pace. The mental effort is where the magic appears. That is what makes racing so much fun.

And that discussion is for another day.