

## Increments

The hill is short in length, being just over 100 yards from its base at the water drainage pipe over which the path is built to the bench permanently affixed at its apex. From the hill's top, the ballfield lights at the opposite end can be seen along with the playground and the soccer fields. The sun passing over the other end of park keeps the path warm in the afternoon and cooler in the morning. This late Fall in the early morning, the sun hides itself from the cold path.

Having run three miles from the trailhead connecting the downtown with park, my course including the long, meandering path into the park, past those same ballfields, along the park's western edge, skirting the dog park, before running the long, undulating incline paralleling the northern edge of the park, I had stopped at the base of my focus for this run, that being the short hill in front of me. 12 times I will run up to the bench at the crest, turning around for the gentle jog back down to the start.

My start is directly over the drainpipe that is beneath the cement segment connecting the downhill segment leading to the beginning of the uphill. Two steps uphill past the drainpipe, a cement segment of the path is broken on its righthand side. Though the path leans hard to the right at that point, running hard uphill means doing a run/leap over that broken cement, keeping the power stride. On that right side, the path flows to a steep downhill grassy slope that empties onto an open horse corral. On the left side, thin deciduous trees, now leafless for the season, and bushes that hide a never ending chain link fence, now devoid of their own cover, cause shadows along the path.

Those shadows lower the real feel temperature in the late fall, through the winter, into the early spring. There is no avoiding the chill running on the exposed path. The hill's location gives me a choice: focus on the uncomfortable sensation of running the workout in cold weather, or, concentrate on getting up damned hill in good form as quickly as possible. Suck it up, Buttercup.

The path is made up of ten-foot long cement squares, a filled-in separation between each adjoining square, the squares connected by this "grout" all along the two-mile path. There is a rhythm to running fast on these squares, counting steps in each square, starting the count anew from the first step into each square run on and over to the next square, pushing to reach the crest of the hill repeat. It's not a requirement of the exercise, but one that tends to keep the mind involved. "One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four." Repeated over and over, each square from one to the next to the next, through the steep to the less steep and finally to the finish of the hill repeat.

Thirty-five seconds to run from the drainpipe to the bench. 20 foot rise over 369 feet in length. That equates to a 3.5-percent grade. Just steep enough to slow me down. Steep enough to bring forth the turbo power. Five seconds for each one-hundredth of a mile. That's my uphill running ability. I lift my knees. I tighten my arm swing closer to my side. I lean forward a bit more than on the flat. I know my breathing is steady, constant, and slow, but my breathing is not my focus. Getting up the hill 12 times is my goal, my focus powering up the hill from the same start to the same finish each time.

Each uphill segment starts with a hard push off the balls of a foot, accompanied by a grim "oomph!" from my mouth, followed by the other leg being pushed into the uphill from the balls of that foot, my shoulder sloping into a low arm carriage, my hips lifting upwards with each stride in my attempt to find as light a footfall as possible. My mind pushes my legs, my legs power my body, my body leads my arms, all with the integrated goal of getting uphill, quickly, in rhythm.

Four strides to a square, too many squares to count. No sideways glances. No looking upwards. Eyes focused on the square beneath my feet. Only when I see my stride passing over the grout line between squares do I realize I'm still climbing, closer to the crest with each square I leave behind. I fight off the urge to look up to the top. I resist the need to lengthen my stride.

Cadence is art, based upon what stride you bring to the dance. That cadence is your stride rate, which means the number of steps you run per minute. The goal is the optimal running cadence averages between 170 to 180 steps per minute. You could measure your cadence by the number of times your right foot hits the ground per minute and multiplying that number by two. Better yet, your smart running watch has a built-in cadence counter for every segment of your run. This is important because runners with a slow cadence tend to over stride and land heavily on their heels. Staying within the cadence average of 170-180 gives you a shorter stride and makes you a faster runner. Maybe.

I'm a run-on-the-balls-of-my- feet, prancing sort of runner. On the flat courses, my cadence is 180-190 steps per minute. On the downhills, my cadence is 180-190. When I was a sprinter in another lifetime, my quick step was 180-190 steps per minute. Running around the bath paths, also in a prior lifetime, I never knew my cadence, from hit to running around the bases didn't take very long. My cadence uphill is actually 180-190. Go figure.

Lifting the knee of my lead leg, continually closing the opposite arm swinging directly forward into the hill's slope, reaching internally for that feeling of smooth running, I power up the hill, again and again. This workout, I notice I am finishing further over the hill's crest,

at a pace faster than previous hill repeats on the same hill, showing that consistency in effort and result runners cherish. Later, well after the workout, I review the splits, noticing the increase in distance and pace uphill as well as back down the hill in recovery mode, and the increase in overall pace for the workout, including warming up and cooling down. That result explains the natural, consistent increase in pacing for my other power workouts, when I run longer in a faster per mile pace, and the measured tempo efforts, run at a lower heart rate and faster pace.

The distance gained uphill for just over one-half a minute may be minimal, but the return for that small gain, repeated over and over, is measurable in longer efforts, and immeasurable in so many other ways. Those immeasurables are the essence of the run.