

Grinding

Today is a bleak day in middle January; below cold, with weak warmth from a shallow sun. In time will come another bleak today late July; beyond hot, the incessant heat pouring down from an overbearing sun. If today doesn't fall in October or April, today is always bleak. But I lace up my shoes, head out the door, oblivious to the sun's quirks. I know April is coming.

April brings warmth and it brings races befitting those who train for them. I have one beginning that month that I've raced the past 14 years. I've another that I've chosen for myself. This year, that chosen one is not Boston. Daydreams await me, but there are miles to run before I arrive in April.

Before April, I have the second part of this month, all of February and March. I'll see ice storms bringing my runs indoors. I'll witness firsthand fierce winds sweeping in with enough ferocity that my running is slowed by its power. Some days, I'll be dressed in layers for running in frozen air, unaccompanied by sun, a despondency lingering in that air. And some days, when a warm weather pattern sneaks in, I'll be slightly overdressed, running fast, sucking in the warmer air feeling like a crisp apple on my lungs.

Today is not a pineapple express weather reprieve from a winter's day in January. I don't live in a balmy weather locale. I live in the Mid-South, a region that taketh away perfection as quickly as naturally possible, in so many ways. In January, a quick taste of warm days is preceded by freezing rain and followed by frigid temperatures. The saying if you don't like the weather, just wait a minute and it will change was meant for this region.

For all that, the Mid-South has nothing on the Pacific Northwest. I first learned how to run from living between the Cascade and the Olympic mountain ranges, along the eastern shores of the Puget Sound, in Seattle. There are 365 different names for the weather in Seattle and not all of those distinct names start with the letter "s". But many of those names do sound like bone-chilling damp, dreary, depressing, wet, really wet, very wet, and my favorite phrase, "Seattle weather". You have to absolutely accept that from Halloween to April Fool's, your runs are going to be uncomfortable. You deal.

I learned the difference between a Gore-Tex jacket and a rain slicker, the latter being almost worthless in the middle of a wet, cold, dank winter days' run. I know that alternating two pair of running shoes, wearing the dry one while the other is drying with the help of newspaper stuffed inside each wet shoe, meant survival. I became accustomed to immediately peeling off the layers of clothing following a run, before imagine hypothermia could set into my bones. Though none of these are sexy revelations, all are very basic parts of the craft in training for slightly warmer and much dryer days. And, if you have Renaud's, a pair of running gloves are a must. Make that several pair of running gloves. See alternating running shoes.

This month, my Saturday long run preparations begin in the dark, replete with hot coffee in a mug and a cat curious as to my goings on. A pair of ankle-high running socks are covered by a longer pair of wool socks, shorts are passed over for merino wool boxer briefs covered over by half tights which are then covered by a pair of running pants. I don't do long tights. My base layer is a long-sleeved merino wool shirt, over which is a long-sleeved winter running shirt, thicker in density, followed by a light outer layer both trapping in the heat I'll generate in running and keeping out the nasty cold air blown into me from the nastier winter's wind. Gloves appropriate for the run, chosen from my vast assortment, running shoes with a thick upper, and a head cover befitting the morning's weather completes the task. Somewhere along all of this preparation, there is a second cup of coffee involved.

In late July, this process is only slightly bit easier in that, sox, a pair of shorts that don't stick to my legs, as light a sleeveless running shirt that breathes, a ventilating running hat, and shoes with a mesh upper are all that I need. Two cups of coffee are still required, however, because the run must start just before the sun rises. This means getting up from the bed at O'dark thirty. Try starting later and then tell me how that goes for you.

But today is not a summer's morning.

Similar to a mountaineering guide trained to absorb the adverse weather conditions while concurrently leading mountain hikers up the steep slopes leading to a summiting, learning to run miles on a desolate winter's morning is a skill required to being a distance runner. I know the air is freezing. There are no "attaboys" for my running in that temperature. I may share the experience with other like-minded

runners, but it's my internal misery index I'm monitoring. I understand being uncomfortable running in winter is a means to an end.

This weekend run is going to be brisk, no matter how much clothing is worn. The first steps into the run are jarring; the cold seeps through the layers, the feet feel the cold flowing from the ground into the shoes. Like an anvil, the freezing air is resting on the legs, slowing down initial progress. Seeing the others joined in the morning's excursion, they are envied for their seeming obliviousness to the artic-like conditions. I wishing I too could be so smooth in transition.

The run's beginning pace is a slog in speed, arduous in gait, and painful in getting to the proper timing. The morning's goals do not include jogging for two hours. Experience teaches me, every single time I run in these weather conditions, that I not only will I survive, and not only will my running pace pick up, in the last half hour I will be so much faster. I damned well better or this could be a long and ugly morning.

Experience also teaches choosing an out-back course is best for winter long runs. I know for every mile away from the start/finish, I merely double the distance and I have my run to the moment. Though I carry a water bottle, I am not thirsting or suffering dehydration. I will consume the carried water during this run, but I must consciously plan to drink. The air is colder than crisp, the brain does not sense danger if I don't drink the water. I know I must.

Late July long runs are no different internally. Those runs hurt because the heat, the humidity, the sun beating down, are relentless. There is no crisp air to suck through the lungs. There is no smooth and easy progression from warming up slow to maintained pacing to a long, gliding tempo finish. The fact I am wearing so little and free to run without multiple layers protecting me from the elements is small consolation. That running frame remains for a different day.

Further into this run, now committed to the morning's effort, I feel the cold sweat captured next to my skin. Gently smoothing my layers against my skin with my gloved hands, I also feel my body's heat generated from the run kept within my layers, a gently nudge for me to keep moving. My grimace caused by the cold is replaced by expressive concentration: I will enjoy this run, or else. Why wouldn't I

enjoy this? No one made me get up to be here. I wasn't forced to run in miserable conditions. I chose this. I love this. So, to speak.

The further into the season, the temperature consistently below comfortable and the other elements following suit, there will be a morning where the air is still, the cold air breathed in, refreshing rather than painful. I will no longer require as many layers as possible. My running movement will be freer, smooth in stride, relaxed in my upper torso, arms gently rocking in a short forward and reverse fashion, my jaw relaxed like that of a sprinter. I will seemingly be flying, barely touching the ground, striding alongside my running tribe members. That run will be cherished.

That run can only be a fulfilled dream from starting and completing today's run. Suffering through elementally uncomfortable days is a necessity of living life. That effort is not only found in running. It's part of my life's efforts with my family, with my career, with myself. I have a slice of paper sitting atop my work desk: one side states "What would I do if I wasn't afraid," the other side offers "eat dessert first, life is short." I undertake both, daily. One leads me to gathering myself, pushing out my day's production. The other leads to enjoying the moment, at any point in my day. My days are each a grind of seeking the feeling of living my life.

Completing today's run, followed by the required after-run mid-morning brunch, my toes and fingers warming from being inside a cozy restaurant, I feel this morning's run. One day, many steps, leading to the next day, more steps, each day stacked atop the prior days. The progression leads to a concluding race. That race leading to another race, a progression all its own. But for today, a run made an otherwise bleak January day into a building block. I am better served for the run. That said, a miserable winter's day is less than ideal. I can deal.