

## Minuses

Atop a hill in the middle of mile four, I could see to its bottom followed by the road's sweep to the right leading to another long, steep uphill. I could also see the long string of runners in front of me. A quick headcount showed ten. Focus time.

I run this race every January. Located in a state park, left barren of visitors in the middle of winter, the course rises from the shoreline, to the park's rim, and then back down to the lakeshore, the starting line being the only flat over the next 15kilometers.

The first mile is a 100-foot gain in elevation to the road that follows the inner rim of the state park, followed by a second mile that descends in equal amount. The third mile begins the arduous falls and climbs, with miles four and five acting as strength test, each having their own very long, steep downhill and a very challenging, breath searing uphill. The deceptive sixth mile starts with a steep uphill followed by a long incline slight in its appearance lasting over half a mile, with the most elevation gain of any mile on the course before leading into a hairpin turn onto a paved, singletrack trail into mile seven, a long, undulating gentle downhill along the trail that zigs and zags back to the roadway.

The penultimate eighth mile starts straight up immediately upon the singletrack meeting with the roadway. It's forever up and it sucks both the breath out of your body and your spirit. Mile nine continues the uphill, albeit less steep, leading to a long sweeping gentle downhill before the sharp left for the last three-tenths of a mile to finish. The course should be called shore to rim to shore, but the naming has more to do with the freezing temperatures. there have been Januarys with this race wherein the race has been competed in 60-degree sunshine. Other years have been heavy snow, subfreezing temperatures, and icy roads.

It is not my style of race. It hurts to run that hard over long uphill's only to break hard down the steep other sides of the hills. No flat to gain rhythm. Every turn either ends a hill or starts another, some finishing an up and starting a steep down, others bottoming out and blending into yet another uphill. Racing this course hurts, is a mental challenge to maintain pace, and sucks to run it.

Last year, it was my only satisfying race, which made for a long year of disappointing racing. This year, I wanted to race it. Not a thing at stake. Wasn't hoping to place. On a course such as this, racing time is comparable only to this race. Race for the time. If not the time, race for the place. If not the place, race. So, I raced. Hard.

In my running life time, I've raced from the front, with those in front, pushing, pushing, pushing to the end. Now I race from the middle, with those in the middle, pulling, pulling, pulling to get to the end. In another lifetime, I raced for the glory of the shiny object and five-minute per mile pacing on a hilly course like this one. In my lifetime, I race for the glory of the thought of the shiny object and breaking nine-minute pace on this course. The only change I see are that the numbers in front of me have grown from less than a handful to counting all my fingers and toes, and then borrowing. The effort remains the same.

Racing is in my DNA. I knew this when I registered for my second race experience, just a week after my initial race. The first was a 10kilometer point-to-point excursion on a bike path alongside a slough (pronounced "slew" in the Pacific Northwest). Feel free to look that up yourself. Gave myself a side stitch just after the second mile. Another runner, a man twice my age, glided up. He ran with me for a mile, coaxing me through the stitch before he seamlessly increased his own pace, running well ahead of me by the finish. Not knowing any better, I convinced myself to run faster, further, eventually gathering in and passing others in front of me, while others did the same to me.

Lessons learned from a young lifetime of playing team sports, a blend of coaching advice ringing in my head ("if you quit, you'll be a quitter"), I made two different decisions on my way home from that race, a new t-shirt in the seat next to me: I liked the race feeling and my not winning did not make me a loser. I found a four-miler.

Seizing the opportunity in front of me, I gently ran down the road in front of me, watching my steps, dropping my hips towards the ground, relaxing my shoulders. I was not going to win this downhill, but neither were those in front of me. Running steep declines are not as pleasant in the doing as they are in the visualizing. Gentle downhill running is fun. A chance to open up the pace without unduly pounding the leg muscles or the back muscles or the shoulders or the brain. Just run and run fast.

A steep decline is a different experience. The body's brakes are more important than speed. strong ankles, strong knee joints, loose hips, strong back muscles, relaxed shoulders are all required to compete with the falling off the cliff sensation. And, they should work in unison, if trained. If the various body movements aren't each onboard, treacherous is a word that comes to mind. That descent will be awkward at best and scary at almost worst. You can guess the worst.

In my youth, say before I reached AARP age, I would throw myself downhill, reveling in the lessened gravity. Fearless. Running downhill, including a steep one, was a well-

used tool in my box. I could pass others while accelerating down, down, down. Then came a time with my mind calculating the effect of a misstep, the heightened awareness of the effect of a fall, the feeling that not all the required body functions were in sync. In other words, advanced age had arrived. For a time, my mind fought my body's need for survival. In the midst of that internal physiological and mental battle, I registered for this race.

Funny things can happen from downhill running. You can see your competitors just ahead of you. Bounding, carefully, down the hill to the start of the next uphill, you notice that they aren't pulling away. In fact, you see that you are closer to them when the downhill bottoms out than when you were atop the hill now behind you. You wonder what would happen if you really climbed that uphill in front of you as fast as you can. Realizing that there is another downhill just after this next up, allowing you to rest without losing time, racing instincts kick in. That's my version and I'm holding to it.

My ankles are no longer strong enough to support a major shift in speed down a steep hill. My knee joints aren't willing to pick up the slack left by the weakened ankles. My hips are longing for a gentle uphill, rather than a precipitous altitude drop. My back muscles will not carry the burden alone. My mind has shifted the thinking from a flying fall downhill to aggressively fighting up the next hill, all based on backing off on this downhill. I was getting closer to those runners I could see. If I could both catch and pass them, there might be more to see and catch after that effort. I am that kid who finds himself in a barn full of horse manure digging deep to find the horse.

This down is the second steep. The first was just a quarter mile back. I ran down that one just as cautiously for reasons of self-preservation. I could only see three runners ahead of me on that downhill because at its bottom, the road turned sharply right and up, around a tree-lined stone bend. But I could see that I was closer. Not by much, but closer. So, I tried running carefully down this hill. I was closer to more than just the first three.

The opening mile of this 15km has a long uphill leading into a relative flat taking us to the start of a gentle, curving descent. I find my race rhythm on that long uphill, knowing I have over eight miles after that. Getting into my groove, others pass me in droves, or so it seems. Ignoring them, I hold my focus to getting to the first mile marker. Well that, and looking around at the woods filled with evergreens and

leafless trees all standing tall, smelling the clean, brisk, windless winter air, and hearing the stillness of morning. Multitasking at its best.

After using whatever speed I have on the slightly steeper downhill that makes up the second mile, still being passed by the others in the race, the course begins its five-mile stretch on the serpentine road traversing the rim of the park. Should the day be still and the sky cooperate, as it did this day, at the top of a rise or the bottom of a decline, a glance to the left will show a hard rock canyon, the distant roar of a falls, a glimpse of a great bird using the draft in its gentle path through the canyon below. Now descending steeply down, those images are not in my consciousness. I got people to catch.

The fourth mile ends with a long, steep, swerving uphill. In pushing myself up that hill as fast as I could, I didn't look up to judge my success against the others in front of me. I just wanted up that damned hill. And I wanted up the damned next one, and the ones after those. That was the day's goal: push the ups harder than normal and relax as best I could on the steep downs. I knew mile eight's long, long, long, so damned long uphill was coming. But this was not a training run. Cresting the hill, I took a moment to self-assess my energy, catch a view of the canyon wall on the other side, and count runners. Still 10. But, they were closer to me. Down the next steep on the road, I went.

Following this pattern through the fifth mile and through the sweeping right hand curve starting the sixth, my efforts were rewarded. Just behind the runner closest to me, I accelerated slightly, passing him in the beginning of the long, gentle incline. He sounded tired. I told him he was running great. Looking ahead, I saw that five more were bunched together and I was closing in. Saying nothing in passing them in masse, my sights set on the three I could still see, knowing there was one who had slipped into the wooded portion of the course. I caught the three at the beginning of mile seven, on the small path just before the small bridge over the small creek, and, I saw the tenth runner.

Endeavoring to catch him before the start of mile eight, I dug into the path, dropping my hips, relaxing my shoulders, slackening my jawline, barely touching my thumbs between my index and third fingers on each hand, balls of my feet gently pressing into the asphalt, my knees absorbing the shock, all the while my pace increasing and the gap to the runner closing. I caught him just as we turned uphill into that penultimate mile. The course change slapped me in the face.

Up, steeply, incredibly steeply, into the next mile we went. Though he didn't know it, he wasted his energy winning the hill. Gaining a football-field length on me, we

ground ourselves through the long, sweeping s-curves from the steep hill into the long portion of that mile. In gaining that advantage, he didn't gain any further ground. I hunkered down, pressing into the road, pushing myself to run stronger. Slowly, either his pace slowed or mine increased. Not matter. He had no answer when I passed him, just before the start of the final mile. It was downhill. That downhill was gentle. That gentle downhill was long. The long, gentle downhill was straight until the final three-tenths of a mile to the finish. That long gentle, straight, downhill was mine. As were the two runners just ahead of me that I alone discovered when I turned onto that stretch.

An adage I created over 40 years ago held true today: run for place; if you can't place, run for time; if you can't place or get the time, race.

I've finished this race five times before today. I've run slowly and placed in my age division. I've run faster and been well out of the running for the shiny objects. I do have the various iterations of the race t-shirt. Those I keep cuz comfort. The shiny objects are fun, but nowhere near indicative of the memories I take away from finishing that race course.

It's a hard course, raced by veteran runners who aren't necessarily looking for a fast time to share with their running friends. The time taken to complete that course is earned the hard way. Racing up and down a hilly roadway, a roadway designed for the horsepower within a car or truck, involves a runner setting aside the ego boost of fast times. That boost is replaced by the joy of powering over that roadway, the realization that the mind can accept the change in priorities, leaving with self-satisfaction.

I placed 19th overall, fourth in my age division.

I was completely satisfied. I raced each mile split in times as fast or faster than in previous years. This happened because I fought to crest each uphill as fast as I could, planting my flag atop each before launching over the other side, downwards. The tougher miles were forty-five seconds to a minute faster than any prior year. The gap between my fastest mile and the slowest were each within thirty seconds of the median time. I let runners go past me early on and passed each of them before the finish. My fastest segment was the last third, which included the easiest mile and two of the hardest. I clawed back all that I had given and more.

My drive home included a pleasant feeling that I'd earned myself the inner-joy from racing to my day's ability. No one had to know. I knew. I'm now a middler and proud of it. All the way home, accompanying the feeling was the race shirt, in the seat next to me.