

Mind This

My high school years were in the mid-70's. Playing every team sport that had a ball throughout, I suffered through one coach in both football and baseball. Coming from an era 20 years before me, he learned his coaching techniques while on a football scholarship to a major university. Toughness was important to him. Drinking water during practice was not tough. Failure during practice wasn't being tough. Questioning why we did a drill was weak. I was not his fan.

Competing teaches overcoming failure. Nobody, from the beginner to the best, avoid failure. Not Serena. Not Tiger. Not Tom. Not me when I repeatedly fell in my learning how to bike ride. We each have self-teaching moments when we know how to do something, we just aren't there, yet. The mental struggle to repeat the physical exercise until we succeed, despite the failed attempts, is the internal strength contained within each of us.

We do the same in our careers, our relationships, and are our other life's passions. We learn and then apply. We apply, fail, and try again. We adapt, finding what elements in our practice to apply to what we've learned. Watching others who seem to accomplish the task using better methods, we find our own serpentine path to success. We learn that we define our own success, with some help along the way.

Some of that assistance we review, self-analyze, and attempt. because we're interested in being smarter, stronger, faster, better. The angst from failure starts anew, albeit at a higher level. What do we keep? What do we toss aside? Is this assistance leading to my internal success? Why is that hawk hanging out on my tree, scaring away the other birds?

I picked up distance running in college. I am a running of the Frank Shorter era. Running was going fast from the beginning, going faster in the middle, and holding on to the end of the run. I learned to race often and race to the front. I needed to see improvement, often and daily. Easy running was not pushing the pace from the run's start, conversing with my running partners for the day, until we silently and tacitly agreed we needed to finish faster. that was training for racing.

Decades passed. More people added running to their personal repertoire. Races became more frequent and bigger in scope. Finishing wasn't enough. Getting a race

shirt for registering wasn't enough. Everyone had to receive a medal, a participant's award. The thrill of racing was lost in that transition. Racing is uncomfortable simply because we are racing, which is faster than we run on other days. Nothing wrong with that. In racing, we run a faster pace than we run on other runs. We run a faster pace further than we run our own runs. We run a faster pace further than on our own runs with others.

Then someone slipped in Mindful Running, because we can't help but tinker with our running. Because once you have the fast-looking shoes, the perfect clothing ensemble, the earbuds playing your music from your smartphone strapped to you, you wearing the cool shades while you wear the water container, what else is there? Oh yes, you have to be in tune with yourself while you run.

Mindful Running is the engagement of all senses and physical sensations while keeping focus on how the senses and sensations are responding to the environment and the exercise while running. Mindful Running's purpose is becoming mentally connected with your body during runs, ridding yourself of distractions while you run. Mindful Running in practice is focusing on how you feel running at your pace, fine tuning your body to maintain that pace. Mindful Running includes acknowledging the discomfort of the run. How is the body responding to the pace, is there any discomfort as compared to pain, is the breathing hard but relaxed, is a pace adjustment needed, is this pace the limit for the day.

On any level of being a runner, mindfulness has its place. "Couldn't I find more enjoyment in my running," we ask ourselves. We can learn this skill as a means to an end, the end being to pay more attention to what we're doing on our runs. It's the tuning fork for running. At least, that's how I looked at Mindful Running. On more than one of my runs, I pondered this mental aspect. Other than wearing good running shoes, running clothing appropriate to the day's elements (never match clothes on a training run), I don't listen to music when I run, I may hold a water bottle when needed, and I am not concerned with other's approval. So, there's that.

My thoughts took a while in coalescing to one conclusion, for me. Through my running years, am I connected during my runs. I am focused, be it to run slowly on the easy running days or pushing the pace on faster ones. Whichever style of run, I am mentally prepared for that day's run. Aging has helped me enjoy the slower moments; continuous running teaching me running in discomfort on the faster days. On some days, running is truly discomforting.

We were into the middle of sixth our mile repeat, running along the road that is the third side of the square loop around the local elementary school. Tucked in behind him, following his fluid but choppy strides, I was holding serve as we turned another left onto the fourth side of our square mile. This even-numbered repeat loop was his time to lead. Three more to go.

Descending down Grandview Street into the left sweeping curve to this repeat's finish, hearing the grade school kids playing off to our left, I caught glimpses of cars cruising the Boulevard, passing the Mall on our right, the sun gently beaming on us from over the ocean, just a mile from us, the interstate separating our view, feeling the midday ocean breeze wafting by us.

"That's the point of the workout," I thought. "Stay on him, then relax before you lead the next one."

I worked my way up to him as we crossed the imaginary finish. "See that palm tree? That's our finish line," he had said five repeats ago, our finishing our warmup loop. There? There's that damned palm tree. Hitting my split time button on my watch, instantly slowing to a slog for our 1:30 recovery, I could feel the latest effort in my muscles. This is hard. I was next up to lead.

I "discovered" the middle school loop from running repeat 880's on the four-lane dirt track sitting at the west end of the school, using what little shade the tall, thin palm tree planted into the southeast outside curve. Needing a warmup loop, rather than doing the entire workout on that track, I ventured over to Grandview and turned left. That decision took me to a left on Hunsaker, a left on California, another left on Ridgeway, past the middle school's entrance, and a final left back on Grandview to the track.

My second mistake, the first being my discovery of the track and using it, was determining that the loop around the school was 1.15 miles in length, with a slight climb on the southern side and a slight descent on the northern side. There was that big palm tree, making a natural finish, and a gentle segment to the start on Hunsaker, next to the house on the corner and adjacent the little cul de sac. The manhole cover where the cul de sac met Hunsaker was a perfect start line. It was a nice warmup loop. I should have left it at that.

Now two-thirds of the way through this mile repeat workout day, number seven was my turn to lead into the push on the flat of Hunsaker, up California, along Ridgeway's flat, down Grandview to the palm tree. "Blythe warning, five seconds," I said. We wordlessly approached the manhole cover, accelerating to pace within passing the next two houses, him taking his usual following position just off my right shoulder. Right off that shoulder. We controlled that pace into the left onto California. Running up California, lifting our knees, relaxing our shoulders, smoothing our breathing, we pushed up that incline faster, maintaining the required pace.

Showing him the track and the loop was my second mistake. "This would be perfect for those mile repeats at marathon pace." He offered. We'd been discussing upping the ante for the marathon we were considering. That meant doing more mile repeats than required for a fast 10km race. The number would start at seven and increasing one every other week to 12 miles. The rest would be a minute, later adjusted to a minute and a half after we did the first workout of seven mile repeats. Outwardly, I agreed. Inwardly, I determined that these once every two week workouts would be less than ideal. Knew I should've kept quiet.

Along the aptly-named Ridgway, maintaining the increased pace, I stayed just ahead of him, keeping him in his place on this lap, just off my shoulder. Turning left onto Grandview, I snuck a peak towards the ocean, easing into downhill mode, the feet lightly tapping the pavement, ankles flexed, knees bent, hips slightly dropping, thumbs barely touching the third fingers, the hands just grazing the upper torso, arms loosely but barely moving back and forth close to the body, shoulders relaxed, jaw slackened, not looking over my shoulder but knowing he was there. And there, was the palm tree. We each hit our split timer on our watches, easing into slog mode around the corner onto Hunsaker.

I knew the next one would put my in hurt locker just to stay with him. The first seven were for the next two. Into the eighth loop, he hit his pace two strides past the manhole cover. I struggled in hanging on, lunging with my arms and legs rather than striding. He glided around the easy turn onto California, easing into his increased pacing up to Ridgeway. Staying with him, I pushed into deep power mode, arms and shoulders raised up. I couldn't hear his breathing over taking my own deep gulps of air. Along the ridge and left onto Grandview, accelerating his pace down to the palm tree. I clung onto the pace, barely.

Neither of us glanced at the watch face on our respective wrist wear. We knew our pace. We knew we were close enough. I knew we had the last repeat remaining. My lead on this last one. I knew he'd leave pacing and blow me away up California. He had pushed the last repeat for just that purpose. From the palm tree finish, around the corner onto Hunsaker, and to the manhole, he talked nonstop. I grunted repeatedly in response. The ninth and final loop would not be just less than ideal. It would suck. That was my being positive.

I was fatigued, mindful of that holding it together on this last loop of the day was perhaps too much, I launched into pace in passing the manhole cover. At least I was going to make a good showing to California. My breathing pattern immediately hardened, my leg muscles bordering on rubber, my upper torso involuntarily tensing in our rounding the corner. Another left hand turn. Telling myself to pick up the pace, my mind lied to me. there was no pace left to push.

Up California I went, my body leaning into the incline, my knees lifting, my arms slightly lowered in the acceleration. No cars were coming down the street towards us; no kids were outside of their classes. Alongside the school, I felt the ocean's breeze nudge me up to Ridgeway flat. Another left turn. I edged that turn, running in the gutter.

Knowing the descent to the finish was less than a half-mile away, I enlisted – implored is a more apt description – my body in coordinating in holding the pace. Unconsciously, my jaw slackened, shoulders slumped, fingers barely touched, hips relaxed, knees smoothly transitioned, ankles flicked off the pavement, chest slightly heaving from the renewed effort. Suddenly, the Grandview descent was upon me. A final left turn.

Dropping my hips further, letting the ankles lead into the gentle curve, gravity came to my aid. I know when I'm running fast. I also know when I'm running faster than that. Ignoring the view towards the ocean, I spied the palm tree finish, just a bit ahead. Arms swinging effortlessly in short back and forth movement close to my side, I pushed hard off the balls of my feet, calves responding in kind. Crossing the palm tree, hitting the split button on my watch, I stepped onto the grass, grasping hold of my thighs just above my knees, air not coming fast enough to suit me.

Wait. I was alone. Turning my head towards Ridgeway, I didn't see him. Looking down Grandview, there was no one. Momentarily puzzled, I determined I needed to run the loop backwards, just in case he'd tripped or snapped something. Man, I was too tired for that reverse run.

"I'm right here," he said. I looked straight ahead where the fence opened onto an unofficial dirt path to the dirt track. He looked rested. "I was too exhausted to run the last one," he said sheepishly. "Halfway up California, I turned into the school playfield, jogged over here and waited for you. You didn't hear me tell you." Chuckling, I told him he was an asshole for having me run the last loop alone.

Looking down at my right wrist, I located the loop time on my watch. Holy shit! "He noticed my changed expression, "how fast was that loop?" "Our fastest, to date, by 10 seconds," I replied. We both smiled.

Handing me a water bottle, he offered that I showed grit in toughing out as fast a final loop as I did. "Where does that come from?" he asked. Thinking over that question, slowly sipping the water from the bottle, I knew the answer. "I locked into all my running senses, " I responded. "I knew it wasn't going to be uncomfortable forever; I knew I could handle the discomfort for that loop."

"That's a tough workout," he suggested, stating the obvious. "Takes a certain mindset to complete that number of loops at our pace. Good for you to let your body do the work and let you enjoy the ride. Mindful running at its best."

"Well, there is that," I agreed, offering one more thing, raising the bottle towards him in salute. "That, and this water."