

Paper Slips

College is when I became a distance runner, eschewing baseball for rainy, cold runs leading to rainy, cold racing. Every running route I learned or created myself had hills. Big hills, small, steep hills. Long downhill. Shorter steep downs. I pushed them all. No resting breaks. Just up, just down. Wash, rinse, repeat. I could push up hills faster than most; flicking my ankles on down the hills fast and smooth. I sucked in air like it was a cold, crisp apple. I have the receipts to show all of that. Years later, there are still those moments. Just not daily.

And those experiences were before I compromised both ankles from falls I didn't intend to take. Age will do that, I have learned. What I thought were weak knees unable to hold up going downhill was a sign that my ankles were weakened. What I thought were quads and hamstrings giving out was actually my ankles being unable to support my body weight during runs. What I thought were weak glutes were indeed weak glutes, weakened from overstressing ankles that had more to give. What I thought I knew amounted to nothing, leading to a DNF at mile 19 of a marathon, an up close meeting with holly bushes my finishing medal.

Today, I lined up for the annual mid-winter half marathon on a course that is unforgivingly hilly. Another attempt to feel good in winter. A loop de jour run early February on the roads in and around a State Park. Weather is rarely temperate. Race morning, runners are usually greeted with subfreezing temperatures, cold winds cutting through the layers of clothing, leading to a long late morning into the noontime accompanied with uncomfortable feelings. Even those years when the weather is running nice, the course takes its toll.

Just off to the side of this race's finish line, out of the path of runners finishing this hilly half marathon and the onlookers there to cheer on the parade of runners, a laptop and small printer are on a table. Putting in their race number on their race bid, the finished runners receive a 3"x5 1/2" paper. On that paper is the race name, the runner's name, race number, gender, age group, chip time, starting gun time, overall place, gender place, and age division placing. The slip of paper is each finishing runner's medal.

The course is a real runner's route: up long hills and down long steep descents, beginning with a long but gentle climb in the first mile, followed up with a gentle

undulation in the second. A stiff challenge uphill in the third mile ending with a turnaround of a cone to a screaming downhill the entirety of the fourth, leading to an idyllic fifth mile which merely beats down the legs before the tortuous long, steep in portions uphill sixth mile. Surviving those miles leads to the next four miles of long, declines, long inclines, each reversed following the second turnaround. The last three miles sneak in frenetic downhill segments leading to hidden uphill parts in each mile. You swear that you are moving faster than the time on wrist shows, but that's a lie. You are beaten down physically, throwing yourself down the final steep descent to the finish.

From the start to the finish, the internal question is "is this hill I want to die on". A nonstop peptalk to get to the end. Some push themselves hard from the get go, willing to suffer over each hill and down to each bottom. Some hold back, running in survival mode because racing on this course hurts. Some of us are in the middle, pushing to maintain our race pace, slowing in regaining our breath before we attack again. And again.

Finishing elation leads to post-race refreshments, commiserating with running partners who earned a shiny object for placing and self-absorbed confirmations that the effort in finishing wasn't a lost cause. Finishing today's race, is affirmation that racing today beat down the alternative of a weekend training run.

There are 52 weekends in a year, give or take, to run long solo or with your running tribe, group, or friends. Some weekends are taken up with vacations, children's events, family gatherings, house chores, or lost weekends. The weekends remaining for the long run have their own paper slips called the receipts from the post-run brunch. Those paper slips become warm fuzzy memories leading back to another meet up. Those meet ups create group think in selecting a race in another place, leading to another paper slip from registering for a race.

Everything has a paper slip.

On its face, today's race slip didn't show the goals I achieved. Every mile had a purpose. Race by heart rate, pushing the beats per minute higher up the many hills, attempting the same in holding the heart rate down the equal number of downhills. Run marathon pace. Knowing even race pace was not going to happen on this course, keep the gap between the slowest mile and fastest mile as small as possible.

Hold pace to the 8-mile turnaround then pass runners without being passed. Avoid the damned dog at miles 6 and 10 that wasn't leashed. I succeeded.

Over the years I've run this race several times. I've never placed. I've never run the courses used very well. I still will register for this race. The race is a step through winter on the way to better spring racing. This year, this race is a sample of where I am in my physical rehab of my hips, glutes, knees, and ankles.

Rehabilitating ankles appears to be the last step in what appears to be a longer road to regaining strength than I had considered. I know this because I slow myself down steep descents. When I am again able to run down steep hills without self-talk and the fear of falling, I will have ankle strength. Meanwhile, there has to be a compensation for those moments. Luckily for me, there are uphill's on a course like this. Realizing now I slowly and steadily shifted from hills in both training and racing because I didn't have the leg strength to cover the running checks I was writing, I need a new power in my running. Hills will do.

By the crest of mile six's final hill, I sensed the last of the big shifts in runners' spots on the course had completed itself. We headed into a long, gentle descent to the big curve at mile seven. I counted a dozen runners just seconds ahead of me, including one foursome that had run as a tight pack from the steep mile four downhill. Kind of attached to them were three to four runners in a futile attempt to keep up. Charging the long uphill in mile seven, I knew that those runners were not breaking away from my radar.

Twisting around the cone at the end of mile eight, I had counted both my place overall and how many were less than a minute ahead of me. Pushing into the wind blowing across the open grassland, I pressed into that wind, catching two runners before the wind became a sideways nuisance. Mentally leaning into my power stride up and over the long hill in mile nine, passing another three runners, I had almost caught up to the foursome that ran two abreast. Gutting up the series of ascents that are the first half of mile 10, I caught and passed them. Flat out left them behind me. Looking out over the second half of that mile, I could see other runners just in front that I could catch and pass, if I showed myself some grit.

Strong ankles I don't have, yet. Knowing there was just one more dramatic downhill, I could afford to show some grit. Grit I have. Placing myself in the Jetstream of two runners now just in front of me, I let them lead up the short hill to the second to last

sharp lefthand turn on the course. Heading back to the start/finish line, surging past those two gave me a closer view of the next five runners, strung out on the gentle shifts of the road to the righthand turn. Relaxing my jaw to relax my arm swing to relax my form, I used up more grit to catch them, one at a time.

Over the second half of mile 11, noticing they were each slowing more than I was speeding up, struggling to maintain my now faster pace than each of those just in front of me, I had passed each of those who were under a minute in front of me at the final turnaround. The sound of another runner now just behind me, huffing heavily in his breathing, broke me mental rhythm. Having announced his presence with authority, passing me as if I was merely another casualty for his race, I swiftly reacted. Choosing not to tuck in behind him, I determined a quick acceleration to both catch and pass him would do the trick. It didn't.

For much of the 12th mile, jockeying back and forth, taking turns being just a step in front of the other, I noticed the penultimate hill first. I pushed; he lagged. I dug; he fell back. I spent my day's grit; he was on fumes. He finished well behind me. what I didn't realize in the moment of one-on-one was our passing the other runners I was chasing without him. Looking ahead beginning the last mile, a mile that had the last uphill blending into a steep half-mile drop to the finish, I saw three more runners within my reach. Maybe.

Checking my ankle strength for a possible stretch downhill, inner sensors informed me that flight downhill wasn't happening, today. Maybe in another few months, when the ankles regain their strength and mentally I'm prepared to launch myself down steep hill, but not today. Bummer, dude. Checking up my stride, not sensing any runner coming up on me, I focused on the closest runner in front of me. I didn't catch her and I didn't pass her, but I almost held my own. No matter. The finish line came and I crossed it. No award, no finisher's medal, no attaboys. Grabbing a bottle of water, I consumed it on my way to my paper slip. In a race of 300, I had moved into the 25-percent. The ankles held their own and I held my own up the hills in the second half of the race. depositing my empty bottle in the recycling bin, I started my post-race run without comment.

In three weeks, there will be another hilly race, a 15km this time. There will be a paper trail from my training between now to then. From that race, I'll be given a progress report on my ankles. Another paper slip.