

## Russian Needs a Plan

Driving home, coming back from my latest winter race, having raced to my age, the thought came that I like to race. I've always liked to race. Racing to be first. Racing to finish. Racing for the shiny object. Racing for the pure joy of racing. Racing is my DNA.

That thought took me back to a race I ran 33 years ago, the third week of April 1990, on a Saturday, in a 5-kilometer race around Legg Lake in El Monte, California, which is actually three lakes. Legg Lake is in the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area the Area provides the San Gabriel Valley lakes for boating and fishing, bike trails, the American Military Museum, a nature center, with over 1500 acres to explore on a bike or by boat. No mention of running.

Two nights before that race, I killed time after work digging through an issue of the California Track & Running News. Towards the back of that issue I found a listing of upcoming races, including the Legg Lake "What the hell," I thought. "I have nothing else going on and racing to kick off a Saturday works for me." Where's El Monte?

I was living in Chatsworth, part of the San Fernando Valley. Before GPS on smartphones, it was the era of the Thomas Brothers Guide. Plotting out the 118 to the 210 to the 164, finishing just past the 10, I was set. For the race fee, I made certain I had different denominations of bills. Setting the alarm for early, I fell into sleep. Driving LA freeways at six o'clock on a Saturday morning tends to be a quick, effortless drive. One week after Easter weekend and the drive is very quick. I arrived too early. No race central was set up, there were no other cars in the parking lot where I thought the race would start and finish. I drove through the park, looking into each parking lot, before winding back where I started. I knew I had struck paydirt when I spied a man next to a van setting up a table. When he pulled out from the van a stack of race numbers, I slowly got out of my car, sauntering even more slowly towards his table.

Arthur Martinez, the man with the table and race numbers, set up these races at Legg Lake. He also set up other races in the same area. He was race director, coordinator, set up guy, community liaison, public relations director, and faciliatory with local government. In April 1990, to learn about a particular race, he could be reached by phone and by his residence. I know this know but I didn't know it that

morning. I dug into the internet for these races from long ago, finding a treasure trove through the California Track & Running News. Finding every other Legg Lake race result but for April 1990, I relived that era of racing.

Looking around from my dark blue 1984 Subaru Legacy, I noticed a few other cars parking, some drivers getting out of their parked cars, following suit with what I just did. I sized each of them up, looking to see who could hang with my pace and I didn't see any. Realizing this was going to be a small race in number of participants, I began to assess my morning's priorities.

Racing is not for the weak-minded nor the faint of heart. Racing requires an internal purpose, unique to yourself. What is it? Is that purpose for racing for the benefit of another? There are races that are legitimately created to raise money for a good cause. I have run races for the benefit of others, separate from the charity sponsoring that particular race, wearing a race singlet in honor those persons. Seeing those unique singlets, other runners let forth a cheer, a wonderful sound in the middle of a race. Those shirts I keep.

When the purpose is for the thrill of winning a medal, a trophy, a ribbon, a plaque, or a gift certificate, there are races of all sizes allowing almost every runner that opportunity. Starting in the late 70's, I've earned my share of each of those, including Olympic-styled medals, horse ribbons, large gift certificates, fruit baskets, tiny ribbons and smaller medals, plaques, wooden carvings, shoes, and the list goes on. Mostly however, I finished fourth. Fourth overall when I was under the age of 40 or fourth in my age division in any particular year. "He was Fourth, often," will be spoken after my passing. It could've been worse: I could have been that guy that always finished fifth.

Is racing for a race t-shirt and a finisher's medal? Now, most races of any distance offer both, only the quality of each varied. In the 1980's, there was a 7-mile race in the Marin Headlands which is across from San Francisco over the Golden Gate Bridge, run up hill over four miles on dirt roads, before crossing over a cut in the mountain and falling steeply downhill to the finish. Only the top 15 received a race shirt. I raced that course, twice, finishing 16<sup>th</sup> the second time.

For me, racing is competition, locking in on someone to race at the place in the race when that matters. Finding a rhythm in stride, holding that pace, determining over

the race miles remaining which can hold that pace and finish in front, holding tight to the day's effort. On this morning, I wanted that race feeling. Starting out on my warmup, I noticed a two-door Mazda RX-7, red body, black top, park near the start line. Out of the car came two wearing race singlets from a local university: a young blond man who oozed speed and a young blonde woman, serious in expression. The race now became interesting.

I warm up slowly, increasing the pace discerningly before I lean into short pick-ups, informing my body go time is approaching. The two blonds did not warm up slowly, passing me on their warmups at a much quicker pace. He floated above the asphalt trail while she lightly touched the ground's surface. Right behind them was the grizzled older guy who grunted along as he matched their warmup pace. Those three meant to race fast. Warm up completed, I traded my training flats for the Aisics GT 2030's, and headed for the start line.

I eyed approximately 20 other runners, including the young blond duo and the grizzled master. Following a brief and vague course description, we were off. Quickly. With muted efficiency, we all located our place in the race's pecking order. One prep-aged runner took off with the blond runner, lasting no more than 200 yards, the rest of us leaning into our own race pace. In a 5km there is not much time to get into race pace rhythm. Passing the exhausted prep runner, I found myself in the slipstream of the blonde and the grizzled master. We headed into the long right hand curve around the top lake.

Each lake is surrounded by walking paths and parking lots, trees scattered around each of the lakes and along the paths. The top most parking lot turns and leads onto the paved path at the far east end, heading down towards the middle lake. Half of a mile into the race, we could barely see the blond man, and for the remainder of the race, the serpentine course obscured him. Rapidly accelerating onto the path, I found my race pace for the day. It wasn't slow, just fast enough to hang onto the grizzly who was hanging onto the blonde, who herself was racing her own race, her feet still tapping lightly off the pavement, each leg pulling gracefully into the next stride. The three of us were the race; the leader was running other than racing against himself.

Single file down to the first mile marker at the far right of the big lake, she was more than a few strides ahead of me, grizzly just behind her. We each locked into our pace

for the second mile taking us around the bottom of the big lake, passed the two light industrial complexes, the south parking lot, and the birds congregated along the water's edge, their sounds matching my breathing. I heard nothing else. Relaxing my shoulders, slackening my jawline, I mentally dug in.

Race strategy for a 5km varies from expert to coach to runner. The race may only be 3.1 miles, but it is still a mile followed by a second mile followed by a third mile with a 176-yard finish added on. Simplified for my purposes: I race hard the first mile, lock in those ahead of me in the second, powering my way in the final mile. Go fast, maintain, push. It works for me. Some 5km races, I vary what I'm wearing.

When we passed the big lake on the west side, into the last third of the course, Grizzly's stride slightly faltered along the middle lake. I pounced, passing him aggressively and with authority, discouraging him from wanting to catch back up to me. Now there was the Blonde. She was not slowing down. Also, she wasn't gaining pace. Time to race with what I got.

Racing is neither merely pushing yourself on a weekday tempo run, nor is it outlasting your fatigue on a weekend long run. Racing is relaxing your body while running faster than in training runs, rhythmically moving your arms with practiced stride, your shoes touching the ground just enough in the launch to the next stride and the next after that, lungs searing from exhaling air as quickly as it came in, the leg muscles offering up a burning sensation, all the while focused on passing the runner in front of you. That is racing. You gotta wanna hurt.

With Grizzly fading, could I catch the Blonde. Second sounded better than third. Now was a good time to hurt. I'd trained myself to race, that training requiring learning the art of running faster when you are fatigued, which requires consistently running a certain distance repeatedly, followed by a brief rest, then running a much shorter distance repeatedly. (Repeat 1000s followed by repeat 200s will do it.) Running efficiency when tired is what you are seeking. I began the effort.

We crossed between the upper and middle lakes, the gap closing. Turning back onto the north parking lot for the last half mile, the gap closing, the Blonde looked over her left shoulder, seeing I was closing. Never look back. Close enough to hear one another's labored breathing, I was not yet gaining. Mentally, I searched around for the right running mantra to repeat in my head, over and over. "Go." "Go, now!"

Those would work for this day. “Anyone can sprint the last half mile,” I’ve been told. I sprinted the last half mile, dropping and relaxing my shoulders, flexing and lifting my knees forward, pushing hard off of my ankles, keeping my arm drive steady, my fingers lightly touching, elbows at neutral, a slight forward lean. Passing her, I heard what I thought sounded like “oomph”. I didn’t look. I picked up pace until I thought I was sprinting. I was.

Raised by a single mom, two sisters as my siblings, I learned early that women are stronger, tougher, smarter, with more nuanced savvy than men. A man will underestimate a woman at his peril. Women who race are not gentle flowers who fade. This day, I wanted to experience second being better than third. Let Grizzly and the Blonde figure out third. Crossing the finish line, the blond man already into his cool down, I turned to see Grizzly finish fourth by a step. No other runner was in sight behind them. Placing my shiny object into my car before heading out for the cool down, I was pleased.

Racing is fun. Racing is competition. Competition for yourself against yourself. Am I trained enough to hit this baseball, to complete this pass, climb this mountain, ski down this hill, finish my work assignment on time. If I can’t, there is no competition. I love competition. I run because I enjoy the energy gained for my day. I race because I love the thrill of pushing myself. I’ve raced often. I’ve been passed often. I’ve completed races where I’ve failed to race. Competing for the self-satisfaction of my effort. But sometimes, when I pass just one more runner in front of me, the satisfaction is akin to a fine wine consumed. That’s a nice feeling coursing through me.

Today, driving home from today’s half marathon, run over steep hills and dales, I competed. I passed over 20 runners in the last five miles, when the body is fatigued from the first eight. Anyone can run the first eight; it’s the last five that are hard. At least on this course. I didn’t place in my division. My entry fee earned me a nice race shirt of technical material. No finisher’s medal. None needed. I wanted to compete and I did, holding my pace consistently from start to finish. Over the final five miles, no runner that I passed, passed me back. No runner passed me. Today was a good race. A glass of wine awaited me.