

Working for a Living

Two-mile warm up. Then, 16 miles, each opening quarter-mile at a slightly elevated pace with the remaining three-quarter mile at a steady long run pace. Two-mile cool down. On a good day for me, that long run would take 3 hours and 20 minutes, which equates to just under or just over 10:00 per mile pace. So much going on and so little time to get it all done. My focus is the key.

Weather. This morning arrives with high, tight cloud cover, though there is no rain in the forecast through mid-day. The cloud cover shifts slowly with the gentle but steady breeze. The air temperature just after dawn is coolish, requiring cotton gloves for at least the first half of the run. Later in the run, those gloves will be tucked into the waistline of the running shorts.

Attire. The morning's run clothing consists of double-layer socks, boxer-brief lined shorts with pockets for the gels that will be consumed every five miles, which just happens to match up with the recently turned on water fountains on the route, a very light merino wool tank top under a short-sleeved running shirt perforated with tiny breathing holes, a ventilated running hat, sunglasses appropriate for the sun's level of morning light, and a fully-charged smart running watch. No tunes: I want to listen to myself think.

Plan. Over sipping my pre-dawn cup of coffee that washes down my one bread slice slathered with peanut butter, I set the workout into the watch: warmup at pace I feel necessary, followed by 16 times .25 of a mile at my projected marathon pace followed by .75 of a mile at a steady long run pace, followed by a cooldown at a pace I feel necessary. As they say, it always looks good on paper. And this time, on the watch.

Drive. Because there is a definitive lack of water fountains in my suburban, rural town, along with the town being devoid of safe running routes, I drive at least 30 minutes each weekend to my running route of choice. Today's route was chosen after last weekend's run in a suburb more welcoming of runners. I am off to the river that runs along the city. I'll run the primed 16 miles on a bike path, trees now in full leaf, offering shade from any sun, bringing an almost imperceptible crispness to the air.

Arrival. Having navigated my way at a distance from the myriad pickup trucks screaming down the interstate, their speeds each in excess of 90 mph (post-Covid Era, the state troopers just gave up enforcing the speed limit), and having obeyed the 20-mph speed limit in the park, I steer into the parking lot closest to the bike path's start point. I am one of very few cars. Four of the other cars I know; four of the other running kids started their runs 30 minutes ahead of me. Car fob now stashed in the key pocket in my shorts, the gels placed in the side and rear pockets of my shorts, collapsible water bottle in hand, sunglasses on hat, gloves on hands, I step out, breath in the local air, lock the car, checked that I locked the car, I start my watch and begin my day's endeavor with a one-minute walk.

I did not incorporate the walk into my long runs in my prior lifetime, when 7:00 per mile running pace was two minutes slower than my race pace. I'm in my mid-60's now, and walking into a slow warmup pace makes sense to me. Muscle kinks show themselves, elasticity in the joints and along my back come to life, and the legs are encouraged to focus on doing their part. once the first minute is up, I then run to the half-mile distance, walk another 30 seconds, run to the end of the first mile, walk another 30 seconds, run to the half-mile, walk a final 30 seconds, before finishing the second mile. It's a little addition to my routine that adds to my entire run in a big way.

Running over 40 years' time does not include lamenting how slow I've become over the passing of those decades. This morning is where I am, different from tomorrow. I'm going to run my 20-miler. The effort will feel just as I expect: continuous forward motion at a pace I've come to know so well. Without the running watch, this morning's pace will seem to be the same as my pace long ago for the same distance. Only then, I was running so much faster. Unlike yesteryear, when I'd bolt out of the car, hurling myself into full-go pace, my breaths so smooth with each step eating up so much asphalt, today I warm up my lungs while coaxing my body into forward acceleration. It's a living.

For me, there is a side benefit to the slow warm up. I haven't wasted too much energy in the warm up miles, leading to better mile pacing ahead for me. Also, and more to the point, with each mile completed, I can do the arithmetic, determining how much faster I am running on a per mile average than the miles before. It's a game entertaining me as I go along. The mental exercise also works to keep me engaged in the gradual improvement of my run. It's my game and I enjoy it. But that

mental play is for later. Right now, the end of the warm up and the beginning of the 16-mile workout was fast approaching.

Most long runs are casual running conversations among runners of equal pace abilities. Long runs are time on feet efforts; the aim being to get stronger in running longer. Well, that, and the anticipated weekend morning after the long run brunch. Some things are just too important to miss. When we're younger, those long runs are paced so much faster that worrying over the pace and the time taken are both barely in the thought process. We run. We run fast. We run fast without trying. Now, not so much. Especially when a marathon race is on the horizon.

Any runner can complete a long run: the long run is defined by the runner herself. "I want to run an hour, or two, or maybe even three." And she does. In adding just a bit of focus to that long run, she becomes much more serious about her goals. We're going marathoning. Now the long run requires a certain pacing, attention to detail with ramifications in meeting her own expectations. Absent a self-governor, this increased attention to pacing will become a burden. Physically, running appears so simplistic: run. Running faster and running with pace requires more than the physical ability to run.

That's where this long-run workout comes into play. And it is play. It's a game, just as chess is play, thinking your way across the chessboard. It's play, just like baseball in honing the skill necessary to run across the outfield, catching a flyball while keeping the eyes steady. This run requires the trained ability to run a sustained pace for one quarter of the mile just a bit quicker than the rest of the mile, the remainder being run at a sustained pace that is comfortable without being slow. 16 times without a break and without fail.

One way to visualize this long run is to run the quarter-mile in your Zone 3 heartrate (85-90-percent of lactate threshold pace – look it up) and the remainder of the mile in Zone 2 (80-84-percent of lactate threshold pace). I view it as running marathon pace and then a bit over marathon pace. While the marathon pace remains the same as the weeks move along towards the marathon, the bit over part becomes faster as I go along week to week and month to month. But man, does it require focus. That focus comes with the side benefit of relaxed running from repeated practice, each of these long runs building on the previous ones.

I use the marathon pace needed to qualify for Boston: 9:20 per mile for my age group. Don't bother looking it up: 4:04:59 for men, aged 65-69. Told you I had slowed since my sub-2:50 BQ days. I add a minute to that pace for the mile remainder. If I run the pacing consistently, I come out with just over 10:00 per mile, which is good enough to accomplish my goal on race morning. In the first few efforts early in the marathon build, the slower section of each mile is more like 11:00 or slower per mile. It's a process. Pacing aside, what I learn more than anything else is relaxed focus.

This long run is not a track workout with a slow jog interval following a faster repeat. This run is not a fartlek, replete with running fast when the flow hits and slow in between. You go on the watch's beep: run controlled and sustained for the first segment following the beep, run steady following the beep, run controlled and sustained for the next segment following the incessant beep, run steady following the next beep. While there is no speed involved, there is constancy. The beep sounds, you go. The beep sounds, you sustain. You focus.

Today, my mile pace after the warm up miles is 11:45. Halfway through, my overall pace per mile is 10:35. Following the 16-mile section, my overall pace is 10:05. And for good measure, I use the cooldown miles to maintain my overall pace, sorta. I feel good, finally, after all the prior weeks. I slightly lift the pace. When I finish the run, the overall pace is 9:55 per mile.

No, I didn't miss the myriad small herds of deer throughout the run on the bike path. I also saw the numerous ornithological wannabes looking for birds in migration, binoculars and cameras in tow, who each looked in disgust at me in my passing, because it is clearly my fault for disturbing the birds. On a busy day on the path, I passed and was passed by other runners doing their thing. Some got the quick wave while others received the low five from my left hand. I heard the boats moving along the river, screened from me by the now thickly-leafed foliage. Rambunctious doggies, babies in strollers, kids on small two-wheelers, hair styles of so many hues and lengths, all were part of my morning long run.

But the best interaction resulting from my long run followed the world class runner flying by me from behind, her boyfriend accompanying her, both talking a mile a minute, which was just about the pace they were running. I saw their backs, a quick, polite exchange. Five miles later I saw them coming back towards me: they waved

with a smile and I returned the favor. Even later, while I was guzzling my post-run water, they finished their run, inquired about my morning's efforts, upbeat in their praise of my distance. Assuming, correctly, that I had a marathon race upcoming, they wished me luck. For my part, I asked them about their run length, their running time, whether there was a section where they accelerated, and if either had a race upcoming. They ran a sustained 20 miles in just over two hours. She had Grandma's on the schedule and he had just qualified for the USA Olympic Trials.

I am so not worthy,