

I Love Lucy

Latchkey Kids began during World War II, when fathers in the U.S. military were absent for the War's years and mothers worked outside the home during the day beyond school letting out for the day. Thus, school-aged children would stay home alone on workday afternoons, taking care of themselves. Television reruns began in the 1950's, with the "I Love Lucy" show given credit for starting the phenomenon. Popular TV shows began to be played in the afternoons in the early 1960's. In the mid-60's, afternoon tv programming included the Dick Van Dyke Show, Get Smart, Leave It to Beaver, the Andy Griffith Show, the Beverly Hillbillies, Bewitched, Gilligan's Island, I Dream of Jeannie, and McHale's Navy, to name a few.

In 1966, I became a latchkey kid, watching tv after school because Mom and Dad got a divorce and Mom had to work. My younger siblings and I would play on the floor in front of the tv, tuning in and out of whatever show was playing for that half hour time slot. We had a lot of time slots to fill before Mom got home. the shows we watched on the three tv network stations were reruns. Such was afternoon television for me in my elementary school years.

Decades later, now a distance runner raising a child into a teen while paving the path of my career, I replaced my weekend long run with in playing baseball with other like-minded men who still wanted to feel the baseball land in their glove, their swing of the bat meeting the pitched ball, the running in spikes on infield dirt and outfield grass, and sitting on the dugout bench when it was our half inning to hit. With each season I played, I missed consistent running.

One October during that spell, I found myself running the Twin Cities Marathon on a glorious Minnesota Fall weekend. I had visions of running a Boston Qualifier on a renowned course. I thought I was in marathon shape. I soaked in the race vibe, the race expo, the local lattes, the quint sidewalk restaurants shaded by the elevated enclosed walkways connecting each of the downtown buildings with one another, and was ready to go. I barely broke five hours.

On the long and depressing flight home, my definitive lack of training came to the fore. I hadn't run enough miles, or sufficient long runs, or quality runs (what we now know as tempo runs and the like). Basically, I had foolishly convinced myself that I

had so much natural ability that I could succeed by merely showing up, pinning on my race number, and lacing my running shoes. Humility came to mind, as well.

What did I ignore in my training block? Long runs no greater than 13 miles is sufficient depth for a 25.2-mile race. Running repeat 400s on the track once a month is clearly deficient effort in building running strength to maintain a sustained pace for a marathon. And mile repeats? Those repeats that used to be a standard staple in my running? That's what the quarters were for this time around. In general, I had sucked the air out of the happy result balloon.

On the other hand, there were moments in the marathon – the picturesque beauty that are the Twin Cities aside – where I felt as if I had just put my fielder's glove over my hand, readying to play catch. The race course goes around so many little lakes and through some pleasant parklike neighborhoods on the Minneapolis side, before reaching the Mississippi River for the bridge crossing over to St. Paul . . . and that long, miserable hill. But before that hill, mostly throughout the first half of the race, I floated along in bliss. Reality sucks.

Like a child that outgrows a toy, I put away marathoning, realizing I needed to regain my base ability first. This would not be the last time I would come to this realization. So, I ran. I ran consistently. I ran fast. I ran slow, I ran long, I ran up and down. I pushed on my favorite running routes, I grumbled myself through my least favorite runs. I ate green eggs and ham. I rediscovered 5km racing.

I enjoy running races. When I was first into running in college, following my end to playing baseball, I trained and I raced on a continuous cycle. I am from the era of run hard, race faster, and repeat. The goal was to push into success. Easy running was reserved for the weekend long run, and then, only for the first mile. I simply pushed myself, knowing if I didn't I was going to fall back. Such is the mindset of a young gun distance runner from the mid-70's into the early 80's.

A constant through those next years was my running solo. And gaining running strength and speed every time I got together with longtime running friends. Those get togethers were usually once or twice a year. We would run. They would run faster and in front of me. I mentally catalogued those efforts, becoming faster on my own runs. The next meetup, I would be faster . . . and still behind them. It was a

fun process. From a varied and steady running diet, I dramatically lowered my 5km race time. Still, a marathon buildup was not on my to do list.

Not until a few years later, after we'd moved east, and I read about a marathon that is no longer run, in Western Pennsylvania, run on a rail trail amidst farmland, gentle hills, and a flat out-and-bank course, did the allure of racing Boston return. And, just as I was ready to push through to a BQ, my thyroid went dead on me. Literally, the thyroid just went to sleep, permanently. One day, I was crushing a run at a newer, faster, more improved pace. Find it in your local hardware store. The very next day, I dragged myself through that marathon at a pace so slow, I thought I was dying.

Over the next year, while medical attention caught up, I couldn't keep up with my running friends. My usual runs were followed by tears of frustration. No one saw them and I wasn't sharing. Still, I ran with an abnormal and high TSH level. Look it up. Because running fast was now out of the question, I convinced myself I could run longer at just a slightly slower pace. So, I ran long and slow, leading from the rear. I ran short and slower. I ran track repeats, shorter and slower, leading no one. Miles and miles of running with only occasional success. I rationalized that I was now in middle age and this was expected.

While there are many symptoms for hypothyroidism, for me, the one clear sign was complete fatigue. The pituitary gland called for reinforcements for the thyroid hormone. The call went unheeded. Now being overly sensitive to cold temperatures. In the winter, I layer more than any other runner I know. More to the point, endocrinology became part of my vernacular, though it took me a long time to be able to spell the word, much less accept what it meant to me.

Levothyroxine. Took the medical people a bit to realize I needed it. A drug in the form of a little pill that replaces the thyroid hormone. Basically, it lies to the brain, telling it all is well with the thyroid. My life has become a lie. Levothyroxine comes in many colors, based on dosage. Mine has been the pink, thin one for several years. All I know is that it works: if I am fatigued now, it's cause I earned it. A few years later, when a running companion and I attempted a winter marathon just for fun, I finished running the last 10 km as fast as I would in an actual 10km race. And, wait for it, qualified for Boston. Built on a steady diet of consistent running and weekly marathon-style mileage, I ran in the Boston Marathon, some two decades after my last one. How nice was that.

Two years later, on a group run, I fell in the first minute of the run. I chalked it up to not seeing the curb that reached out and tripped me. Bad curb. I finished the run. A few months after that incident, I fell again moving an empty box. Just a couple of months after that, I fell down one stair, straining the bone, ligament, and tendon package that makes up my right ankle. I followed that with a fall in moving a heavy object, doing the same damage to my left. The next week, I ran a marathon, attempting to qualify for Boston for a fifth straight year. Strained ankles get really cranky over the distance of a marathon.

I didn't finish that attempt, finding myself pushing myself hard right at Mile 18 into the holly bushes on the right of the course. Did you know that holly bushes have really sharp thorns? Turns out I had developed balance issues from my hip muscles tiring from their attempt to compensate for the severely weakened ankles. I hadn't a clue, other than it was time to address the issue. Walking in imitation of John Wayne's walk when he was older was not my aspiration.

I learned about glute exercises and ankle strengthening movements and hip strengthening and core movements and iliotibial band exercises, doing them all on a rotating basis. Cuz running. Then, I developed a lateral heel whip that brought new skin to my inner ankle bones, followed by knock knees from really bad running form. All the while, I ran. Awkwardly, but I ran.

I convinced myself that as I overcame my weaknesses, I was becoming stronger. Ignoring the fact in plain sight that my pacing was once again, very slow, I surged onwards, unaware that I was not in the marathon shape I thought I was in. I ran, unbalanced, through long runs, tempo runs, repeats, easy runs that were very awkward feeling and must have looked awful judging on the expressions of other runners and walkers passing me. Meantime, I was diligently doing my physical therapy exercise, daily. Inconceivable that I couldn't qualify off of this compromised training block, though I do not think it means what I think it means.

Failure in this instance was not inconceivable and I did fail, on a glorious course in Northern Michigan, along the Lake, in shade and cool springtime air. I've seen this before. Time to focus, again, on running for running's sake. Consistent running. Varied running. Fun running. The rest will follow.

Inconceivable to think otherwise.