

Scratch

When the weather has been dry, there is a bike path calling me to run it. The path is four miles one way, based on its natural topography. Starting alongside a high school, dropping slightly down to a sharp righthand bend in the path, it follows alongside a small river, meandering through shaded woods to an underpass, a quarter mile footbridge, a long, long gentle curve that the sun covers before crossing another bridge back into the shade alongside a golf course to the natural finish at a water fountain. Running it has to come at the right time in my training block.

It is my day to run fast, starting just one street over from where I live. It's a balloon-shaped course: 2.5 miles out on the wide median of the main drag to the lake, 3 miles on the path around the lake, and back on the median. Always passing the same business storefronts on the out and back mixed in with craftsman and cape cod style homes, and always around the lake I expect rowers in their shells on the lake, pedestrians and other runners going each way, and an occasional fisherman.

Running the river route is weeks in the planning. I brood over the weather, hoping for mild temperatures, bearable humidity, a low dew point, and dryness. When the rain comes, the bike path is one long puddle. That removes any thought of faster running.

Running out to the lake is part of the collegiate experience at my university. No matter if the run starts from the dorms, or Greek Row, or the intermural building, or my apartment, running on the median and around the lake and back is a required course for graduation. Or so it feels.

The path is part of a 10-mile course, starting from the parking lot a mile from the path itself, the only parking area making the path easily accessible. That mile is the warm up for what's to come on the path. The parking area comes with water and a facility. On a summer morning's run, I'll carry a handheld, just in case the water fountain isn't on. This run is my river route, a 35-minute drive from our house.

I call this route my basic loop; I run the basic loop at least once a week if not twice. Though there are water fountains throughout the lake loop, this is in the Northwest, where the air is always cool and wet. Thirst is rare. I can run anytime of any day, unburdened by heat concerns. Layering is a year round option.

Running the four miles out to the water fountain and back on the flat, quiet path is my strength test run: what pace can I maintain running the path. I will run the river route as a nonstop eight-mile run, or chunked into an out segment with a short rest followed by the in segment, or split further into a variation of mile repeats. I have choices, depending on what I need from the run. This morning, my run will be fast and there will be no prisoners taken.

Some days, in my walk-jog over to the busy thoroughfare to hop onto the median, I sense a need for speed; a good day to push the pace on the basic loop. No planning involved, just a feeling that wells up inside me while tying my shoelaces before grabbing running gloves and my running watch. Today is one of those days.

No heavy rain for over a week. The dew point is below 60-percent at the start, the heat and humidity are both bearable. Today is a good day to run fast. I've been thinking. Thinking about this run, about running fast, about finding out where I am with my running strength. Endurance I have. Do I have the power to go with it? This run is part of that determination.

There are two ways around the lake: one on the two-way bike path 10 feet from the lake and the other on the mostly-crushed gravel path directly alongside the lake. The path has room to run, while the dirt path is just fun when none of the dirt has turned muddy. It's the path that reckons the day's speed. once around the lake, on the path, and only on the path, is 2.83 miles. We call it 3 miles, but runners know.

Today, I want to test my endurance strength; can I hold not one but two four-mile tempo efforts at marathon pace, with a four-minute recovery in between. Why four miles? That is one way, each way, on the river route. Why a four minutes? Cuz.

Crossing to the median at the light, spontaneously deciding to push the pace to the lake, accelerate the pace around the lake, and hold that pace back to the light, I turn onto the median path and hit the watch's start button. Light traffic alongside me, the path is not full, and it's a good day to be me.

Approaching the quarter mile post next to the path marked "0.50", I hit the start button on my smart watch, easing into the temp pace, making certain I don't spring the first quarter mile of a four-mile split. I've always looked for the "0.25" post, and

even the “0.00” post, to no avail. One of life’s mysteries which may never be resolved. Just past the next post, I turn the sharp right and away I go. Time to run to match my daydreaming over the last couple of weeks.

Though there are long stretches of median without interruption, there are stoplights to be crossed before arriving at the lake. One waits at the light when there is even a hint of traffic. Ignoring a car is not an option. A passing car outweighs me by at least 1,000 pounds and is moving too fast. I wait. I don’t have to wait once I am at the lake.

Focus. That’s the essence of this tempo run. Ease into marathon pace. It’s only four miles. The first time. Check the split on the watch at the post just before the itty-bitty bridge over a little creek. Hear the first mile split just around the 90-degree turn to the right before the underpass. Just a bit slow. Manage my way through the chicane that is second mile into the deep woods with a sharp left and then a long, slow right onto the long footbridge overlooking the river on the left. The second mile split is slower, but it’s always the slowest mile.

On a track, the repeats are always in a counterclockwise direction. Cuz it is. Approaching the lake, I can choose clockwise as well. I chose the usual direction. Cuz I’m used to it. I drop the pace just at the water fountain at the old gymnasium, hitting full stride as the path veers gently left. My running watch doesn’t give me mile splits, so when I run past a quarter mile mark embedded in the path, I take a quick glance at my watch. I’m ahead of my usual fast pace on this loop. At the first mile marker next to the first picnic tables that I’ve memorized from running around the lake, I remain faster than usual.

I live for these runs. I can go fast, feeling the stride relax with each passing mile. Running fast for a sustained distance or time is so much more uplifting than an easy run or a long, slow run. Both of those are important elements to the program, but not nearly as fun. Planning out the run in my head, plotting the course, the time, the effort, and the sustainability of my goal on this day, fills my head. I remember these runs.

I live for these runs around the lake. I run fast, feeling the air down my lungs, my shoulders relaxing, my stride opening up for the effort. So light on my feet, so easy is the gliding stride. From today’s effort, I’ll run faster the next time. I’ll race faster. I’ll

think about these runs before I execute them, saving the plan for a day when the body thinks its ready to go fast. Today is that day.

Into the third mile, around the mile long, sweeping curve of the path, the river on the left, the corn field on the right, I sense my pace quickening before I realize it is happening. I am faster than marathon pace. Over the pedestrian bridge, back into the woods, the river now on the right and the golf course on the left, I ease into an even faster pace towards the finish of the out temp run. Just at the end of the shade, I am done. I am on pace. Four minutes of recovery into the sun follows.

Passing the new boathouse for the rowing crews, I glance over to the park across the busy intersection where we run kilometer-long up and down on a well-worn trail. Not today. I'm moving fast well into the second mile, just before lover's bench, where the view across the lake is breathtaking when the trees all leaf simultaneously. I ease into my fastest pace to the old gym water fountain. Crossing past the fountain, I am done. I head back towards the median.

Jogging back to the shade, I plunge myself into the return tempo run. Within strides I am into marathon pace. Across the pedestrian bridge, I am slightly faster than marathon pace. This is when the strength from training overcomes the fatigue of sustained faster running. I term it power through fatigue. I am in full stride, relaxed with each step, focused on pace, teaching myself to hold lightly on the pace each passing mile. This is why I run all the other runs. For this fleeting moment in time. I love running this way and always have.

Passing from the lake onto the median, I maintain the pace I had around the lake back to the crosswalk that is my finish. I am painting my path with my quickly moving legs, the breathing is easy, no strain in my effort. Along the longest stretch uninterrupted by crosswalks, I have found my stride. I know I am running fast. I am powering through the final push with graceful strides earned from my other runs. This moment, built from those runs, is fleetingly glorious. I want to do it again, soon, and as long as I run.

At my car, I ponder when I can do this again.

Back at my door, I know I'll run fast in moments like these, always.