Speed . . sorta

They were referred to as wind sprints, those things we ran at the end of our team practices to ensure we had the endurance to chase down fly balls in the outfield, outrun cornerbacks on passing routes, and get to the rim ahead of the opposing guard for an easy layup. That was also when we lived with earthen floors, outdoor plumbing, and walked to and from school, uphill, in the snow, year round.

In high school football season, our coaches brought back from a coach's seminar something they called "intervals." Lined up at one end line of the end zone, we ran down to the opposite end zone end line and back. It got better. We only had a 30-second standing rest interval between the 240-yard repeats. For the linemen, they had to run the repeats in less than 50 seconds. The rest of us had just 40 seconds to start and finish each repeat. To make the squad, we had to successfully run 10 repeats in the time allotted. During the season, on Mondays and Wednesdays at the end of practice, it was six repeats. Of course, being the mid-70's, there was a nonstop droning of the coaches "encouraging" the team.

Not bragging: if I ran any of those repeats in more than 35 seconds, it was from my cleats slipping. Four and a half decades later, I can barely get 100 meters in 35 seconds' time.

From playing baseball at age five and into college, every so often the team would be asked to "run the bases," beginning with running to first following our bunting a tossed baseball. Major leaguers with elite speed will hit the first base bag in just under three seconds. I could do that. Closest to six seconds wins. I would win. An imaginary triple would succeed in just over nine seconds. Check. A pretend inside-the-park homer required under 16 seconds. Heh.

I lived for that feeling of running flat out to catch a fly ball no one else could reach or to take the extra base before the thrown ball because I could. If only I could hit as well as I could sprint. Well, and be a bit more muscled in stature. Given my body type, that was not going to happen.

(I raced and beat the State 100-yard champion from our high school because he wouldn't leave me alone about my speed, but that's a different story for another time.)

Taking up distance running, I learned about "straights and curves" as part of a runner's repertoire. Of course, not knowing there was a correct way to run these and running solo, I developed the specialty of sprinting the curves and jogging the straights. Perhaps the bowl-shaped track that I used may have had something to do with that practice. Noting like leaning hard left into, though, and out of a 120-meter curve. Try it out. Somewhere in your town, these teenaged runners from long ago are running straights and curves opposite how your coach demanded they be done. even worse, some of the4m may be teaching "spring the curve, jog the straights" to young, impressionable runners they coach. My gawd! It just may be a . . . revolution!

In coaching high school distance runners, I would indoctrinate the younger and new runners on the team with straights and curves, letting the seniors and juniors show the newbies how it was done in that program. (Quick digression: one year, I had a very deep girl's group of milers and four boys who could fly in the 800. Taking a cue from velodrome cycling, I would put half the team at the start/finish and the other half at the 200-meter start line, dividing the two lengthy line of runners as equally as I could. The team first to catch the last runner from the other team would "win" the right to pick the next workout. The catch? The last runner for the team being caught, boy or girl, would be one of the faster runners, had the right to run as fast as they could to avoid being caught. It was serious stuff, followed by howls and giggles. We also consistently played frisbee golf, football style, but that telling is for another day.)

About this time, Steve Prefontaine made famous the University of Oregon 30/40 workout; running half the track or a 200 in 30 seconds, followed by running the second half of the lap in 40 seconds, continuing this alternating pace without rest until you can't continue at those paces. Pre's purpose was running his 5km race pace followed by a "float" allowing him to run fast through running strength, despite the lactate build up in his body. Pre once ran 20 laps of that workout. Galen Rupp ran 24 laps. I modified my runners' paces, as well as my own. I'm getting ahead of myself.

In looking up "straights and curves track workout," using the google, the following is offered: This is an easy program you can do on any track. Sprint the straight length of the track (100 meters) and then walk the curve. The sprint should take about 15 seconds or less, and about 45 seconds for the curve to recover. Then, repeat for 8 to 10 sets. I'm 64. I no longer run 100meters in under 25 seconds, much less under

15 seconds. When I recover to the next 100meter sprint, that recovery jog takes longer than 45 seconds. But an aged boy can hope.

Another entry on the google is that "the simplicity of the workout will let you go at your own hard effort level—while also making the time and miles fly by. In the end, your mind and body get used to picking up the pace for short intervals that you generally don't run on the road, and each walk break gives you a chance recover so you can keep going." Working backwards, I am not walking any part of that workout. I may be slow from aging but I am not weak. That aside, I do agree with repeatedly running my own hard effort level with a short recovery between each effort. That's the purpose of this workout.

Yet another google entry offers that this workout doesn't require too much thinking or planning and is a good way to get a feel for running on a track. I won't argue that point. That's why this workout is being discussed. My running background gives me comfort in running four miles, or 16 laps of the track, alternating accelerating through the curves and slogging slowly on the straights, twice each on every lap of the track for 16 laps. Accelerate. Jog. Accelerate. Jog. 32 times. Sets up the next track workout two weeks later.

Such a simple workout, pliable in pacing and the number of laps. Speed in running works for all distances and all ages. Speed workouts lead to more efficient strides and that leads to faster running in races or solo. Build muscle, improve ankle, hip strength, and add to bone density through speedwork. Balance blood-sugar levels and hormone profiles, burn fat, and increase aerobic capacity for longer runs. Straights and curves will bring world peace, end global warming, and bring better shows to television. You get the idea.

Straights curves lead to stretching out the curve to include one straight, you have a 200m repeat. 100m jog between repeats. Add another curve or straight for a 300. 100m jog between repeats. Two curves with two straights is a 400m repeat, which is one lap on the track. 100m jog between repeats. And if you add four curves with four straights, that is a half-mile. The jog time or distance between repeats is up to you. Now you have a plan.

Increasing the repeat distance takes time. Followed by weeks into months, and months into years, actually. The essence of the running remains the same: running

fast for a given distance. Because we are a curious species, we test ourselves by increasing the distance while maintaining the speed. From there we learn the secret of running is to run often at the speed we have, increasing both with the passage of time.

I want to race faster than I am currently able. In intuit from my experience that I need to run faster on my workout runs. That necessity does not require repeat miles at world record pace or steady miles huffing and puffing through the effort. How can I keep distance speed? At first, I gotta think small. Like sprints. But run those too fast and hard, I may not be running again for a stretch. Hence, straights and curves. Gliding rather than sprinting. Recovering rather than building resistance to fatigue. Like a child on a playground or on grass, just run for fun. Glide and repeat.

Straights and curves. No need to complicate the workout. Let your legs determine the pace and let your mind fix the number of laps. Ignore the heart rate level; your body will tell you with each curve (or straight) how fast you can run. How fast you are running is not relevant: you are running fast but not sprinting. You're gliding in your run around the curve without concern for time. ("Oop! I'm slow by a second. Oop! I'm too fast by another second." You could cause a brain fart if you keep that up.) Just run baby.

If you can run any number of laps beginning with one, just like the mouse given a cookie, you'll do more. And if you can run 16 laps of those curves and straights, then, you're me. It's good to be me. the soccer girls lounging on the track may not appreciate your efforts (again, for another day), but their coaches get it. I get leg turnover, over and over and over and . . . leading to the next rung on the old guy distance speed ladder. I'll lend you a hint: a titch longer than a curve and bit shorter than half a lap. You figure it out.

Eventually, these workouts based on my curves and straights theme will show up in faster pacing in my shorter races and longer workouts. I want to see faster pacing sustained in my races and that means I need faster pacing in my tempo running and longer repeats off the track. That means I need a faster pace built from the strength gained from accelerating the short-distance workouts.

I can't do that until I master the curves. Gotta start somewhere.