

November

We were in Phoenix to see our college team play the locals.
For reasons well known, at that time, those games were played at night.
We had time to kill until nightfall.
Our chosen course was running in the early afternoon.
We have made better choices.
Until you've run in the dry desert heat of early November, you haven't lived.
We wore shorts, socks, shoes, a running watch, but no hat, no shirt, no sunglasses.
Recalling a park, a couple of miles away, we headed there.
We wanted a shortish run, not an eight-mile run in well under an hour.
The run started and finished at our lodging: a rundown single-story hotel.
We were staying in a low level part of town.
Police sirens in the distance being heard, incessantly.
We started off on a busy, multi-lane road, headed into the sun.
The dry heat was noticeable from the start.
We felt any liquid in our bodies move to our skin and then evaporate.
Neither being thin, nor fat, nor shaded saves anyone from dry heat.
We were young and not so stupid as uninformed.
100 degrees is unpleasant in any climate.
We learned that running in 100 degrees in dry desert air is uncomfortable.
There is no moisture in the air to assist the body in movement.
We found the park, well less than a half hour or four miles into our run.
A water fountain was discovered.
We called the local tv station so that the news could be spread to the public.
The water fountain actually worked.
We sucked down the warmish, okay tasting water, glanced about us, and resumed.
Very dry air sucking the life out of us, the heavy sun baking us into nothingness,
we picked up our pace.
As was our routine, we ran fast going back into the heat, the last mile the quickest.
We chafed at our lungs searing from the dry heat.
Hot to the touch, our skin felt tight, head hair dripping hot sweat.
We had no need for a character-building run.
Running in dry heat is not soon forgotten.
We cooled off in the shade, with some cold refreshments.
We saw our college's team defeat the locals.
Decades later, I miss that run.

Last week, while running along a partly-shaded path, I popped out into the sun. The sun's angle left a shadow of my running form on my left, just far enough way from my body for me to see. What I saw in myself wasn't pretty. Gone are the smooth, gliding strides, the sucking up ground from the quick pace. What remains are short, choppy foot plants accompanied by awkward forward progress. I run as I envision Frankenstein would before dance lessons. I'm old. Somewhere in the past, I could run fast. Then, as time rolled along, I could run faster before than I run now. But I have never run well in a climate of high heat, high relative humidity, and high dew point. Welcome to the climate east of the Mississippi. Aging has made that failure to connect to my climate just that much more difficult. In the summer heat, I run slowly. No matter the time of day, before dawn, early morning, or dusk into darkness, I am slow. High dew point coupled with high temperatures forces the blood to rush to the skin, attempting to put out the heat-caused nuclear holocaust erupting with each running stride. Running stride is an oxymoron for me in these conditions. My mind believes there is a forward, purposeful stride, faster than a walk. The watch tells me that the effort is more of a forced march, double time, than a running stride. Gone is the fast pace creating the vision of the balls of my feet lightly dancing on the head of pin, touching just enough to produce the push into the next long, gentle stride forward. Bells on my racing flats were my calling card in racing in the day. I knew this drove those fast racers around me batshit crazy, but I ran with those bells on daily. White noise. To see their backs stiffen when they heard me coming on late in a race fueled my pace. Similar to how I developed my batting swing, I built my running style from the races I saw on television, long before cable and video and indoor plumbing, when we walked 10 miles to school and back in the snow, uphill. A young runner, so fast he only slightly bends his knees, looks graceful in his scratching his itch for his need for speed. An old runner whose knees don't bend, with hip muscles too stiff to support any running pace, appears . . . awkward at best, a painful watch at best. Slow running accompanies that loss of grace. The worst thing about this fall is that I am too slow to run with other aging runners and too fast to run with those who have no concern for their pace. I'm driven by my own standards. Failure is not an option, though it happens daily. Paraphrasing Sam Baldwin from "Sleepless in Seattle," I get out of bed every morning, breathe in and out all day long, so that one day, I don't have to remind myself to get out of bed every morning and breathe in and out, so that I won't have to think about how I had it great and perfect for a while. That's what I do now: I get out bed to run, no matter the weather. I suck up the hot, oversaturated air in the summer and the dry, throat cutting air in the winter. It's not great, but it's what I do.

An article I read at some point in the past brought up the fact that children at play are serious. In their make-believe world, they create the story, the characters, the environment. They organically create playtime in a moment, the vastness and splendor of their play organically changing with each moment.

When our son was of that age, I did my best to leave him alone, so as to not disturb his imagination playing out as he saw it. His stories had raucous movements, sweet moments, and thrilling adventures. Now thankfully, he does the same with his children. They appear to be aging perfectly.

When an adult is at play, the same holds true, though we've turned our imagination into a pouring of our soul into rooting for our favorite team, star, actor, singer, entertainer. As adults, we add adult beverages to our play. The result is a moment's respite from working our careers, raising our children, caretaking our homes.

In the years since that November run in the desert, I've come to realize that run was the result of my adult decision that running would be my adult play. If was going to run in the midday dry heat, running was to be my outlet. Over the years since, running has been my imaginary companion.

I am the greatest runner on my favorite running course, until someone faster than me passes me. I am the greatest runner running repeats on the track, until someone does their repeats faster than me. In a race, my time is the greatest despite the fact that I don't place first. Because me is faster than I am, me is the greatest.

I take my running seriously. Why wouldn't I? each run followed by another run followed by another, repeated weekly, then monthly, over 45 consecutive years is more than a habit. It is a lifestyle. It doesn't have to be healthy. It doesn't bring wealth or fame. It is what it is.

Running is important to me, it doesn't have to be important to you. I don't question your recreation, your career path, the raising of your children, or what brings you happiness. I share the road with you in driving to work. I dine at a restaurant while you do the same, blending into the experience. It all works.

I don't run every day. When I awaken, I decide if I can run that day. Life can get in the way. If I run, what type of run do I attempt. What will I gain from that run. Often,

just going out door is accomplishment enough for that day. But there are some days where the run just means more. I'll get out in the severe heat or the bitter cold. I'll run the hilly course or attack the track. This play after all; I can make it what I want it to be.

Because it is my play, I am willing to do the ankle, hip, and glute exercises. I do the strength work. I consciously address my running form. While I am that kid looking for the pony in the room full of horse manure, I am not the old man imagining windmills to be dragons that must be slayed. I am no fool.

Weekly, I run a loop along a river trail, connecting five neighborhoods. The loop includes a long hill, many deer, several long straight sections under tree canopies, and the solitude of morning. I've begun to chunk that run into sections that I could run fast followed by a recovery section. Over the summer months, I've experimented with how those chunks work with each other. My pondering, imagining, and experimenting have led me to a solid plan.

Now that the summer heat has turned to dryer autumn warmth, with the leaves turning color and falling in the morning sun, the first fast section is the slight decline along the river for .85 of a mile, followed by a gentle .35-mile jaunt to the bottom of the long hill that loops back down through a huge apartment complex leading back to the start of the 1.2 mile loop, followed by a .4-mile glide over the road to a one-mile push through parts of two neighborhoods, the glide in reverse to the river straight. As I mentioned, I've had a long, hot summer to ponder all of this.

With runs like this done consistently, somewhere down the road, I'll feel like again like I'm a runner. Or not. And, if I don't, the hope won't be lost from a lack of belief, effort, and guile. Today is for daydreaming, pondering, and scheming. Tomorrow is the day to begin laying the foundation to the goal. That's how it's done.