

Experiments

He wasn't in the stands to watch me very often, but he was there this time. I knew he was there, though I didn't look at him or wave in my walk to the plate. Inside of me, I wanted to show him I could hit. I had quick wrists but not a lot of power. When I was locked in, I hit long line drives down the rightfield line or into left center alley. When I wasn't locked in, I struck out or hit ground balls that I beat out to get on base. In this game, I was locked in. I'd already smacked a double down the line, turning that into a triple because of my speed around the bases. In the last inning, I hit a screamer to the third baseman that would have smashed his face if his glove wasn't in front of his face.

I was 14. In baseball, I'd found my first teenage vocation. Being lefthanded and fleet of foot, I played centerfield while driving opposing teams crazy from my fearless baserunning. I learned that I had that sense of where the ball was going to go before it was hit. I could get the jump on a pitcher in his wind up, stealing any base while he was still striving to throw a strike. Those parts of the game was fun.

Where I struggled was batting. I could see the ball and I could hit it, just not as consistently as I wanted. Name me a ballplayer who doesn't think that same way. This at bat, I needed to get a hit. I wanted to impress him in person. He worked long hours on a long daily drive into LA from our home in the Valley. I wanted him to see his son succeed. Crowding the inside of the plate, feeling my spikes gently dig into the dirt in the batter's box, I knew this pitcher would throw a curve ball and that curve ball would be on the outside of the plate from me. With no one on base, the pitcher went into his wind up, turning his left hip away from me just before he separated his right hand with the ball from his glove, tipping his hand ever so slightly in anticipation of the curve ball he would throw. Just behind me, like white noise, I heard the catcher shift his mitt and the umpire's chest protector adjust as they both leaned forward, anticipating the pitch, which never reached the catcher.

Our games were played on a ballfield in a park adjacent to the local high school. Along the leftfield outfield line extending past centerfield was a creek that dried out quickly after a rain and was otherwise dry most of year. The distance to the creek was far enough away from home plate that very few batted balls reached the creek's bed on the fly for a home run. Any ball that hit before the creek on its way into the creek was a ground rule double. Stepping quickly and just slightly towards the edge

of the batter's box, I strode into the curve ball, flicking my wrists just as my weight shifted into my hips and trunk, head down and relaxed, arms tight to my upper torso and relaxed, my legs strongly set with my feet dug into the dirt. The pitched ball never had a chance.

I knew it was a great swing from how little I felt my bat hit the ball. In a practiced motion, dropping my bat following completing my swing, beginning my sprint down the first base line, I watched the ball accelerate over the shortstop over the leftfielder over the creek before landing well over the other side. Just a few steps into my reaching my full speed, I slowed down. That ball was gone. The other team's outfielders' shoulders slumped. The pitcher angrily through his glove against his left hip. I yelled.

Rounding first base in a steady trot, I glanced over to the stands behind our dugout where he had been sitting. He was now standing, clapping, smiling, shaking hands with other parents. He didn't smile often, tired from work and parental life. He caught my glance, returning a happiness of his own back to me. I brought the two of us a shared moment of joy. I was his boy playing a sport he played so well before he went into military right after his high school graduation. I made him proud. In hindsight, I know my mere breathing would have made him equally as proud. But this moment was special.

I hit a home run and he was there to see it.

Just at the first mile marker of a half marathon I was racing, a runner cut directly in front of me. I veered away from her to avoid falling. My left foot found a large depression in the asphalt, just deep enough forcing my Achilles to strain itself beyond its limits, causing me to fall right side of my face first, followed by my right knee, my right shin, then my right elbow and finally my right hip bone. I got up, after ensuring myself that I was mentally cognizant. And, yeah, you betcha, I ached for the next 12.1 miles and well into the week following. All that ache was nothing compared to the pain in my left Achilles.

The forced fall leading to the overextension in the Achilles only exacerbated the tendonitis that arrived a few weeks before the race. Stubbornly, I pushed a pair of training flats one run too far because I have an artificially set distance I need to run in any pair of running shoes I own. These were a light shoe, with a titch lower drop

between the forefoot and the heel than I am used to running in, but they were so much fun for me when I ran in them. I ran in them for almost 400 miles. Mistake number one.

I've been working with physical therapy over the last 20 months, trying to regain both my walking balance and my running form, both lost over time and from separate falls leading to weakened ankles. Just as I was pounding the last miles on the now-discarded training flats, I changed therapists to one who specializes in assisting endurance athletes. He added exercises to strengthen my core, my hip muscles, my ankles, my thighs, my leg alignment, and my recipe for desserts. Doing those diligently placed pressures on my physiological system that had been long forgotten. There is a difference between fatigue and pain, but the former can lead to the latter. Especially when continuing running while engaging in rediscovering my long-forgotten muscle groupings. Mistake number two.

My third mistake was learning about the tendonitis through using the google, from which I gleaned that this is a common overuse injury for runners who either have accelerated their training too much, too quickly, or had an equipment failure, like using a pair of well-worn running shoes too long. Either way, each website held fast to a 6-8 week recovery period, with icing, elevation, and small exercises. There was also something listed on each site about rest. In your dreams. I am familiar with Captain Kirk's frame of reference when faced with adversity and I too, do not believe in the no-win scenario.

Years ago, both my quads were tired, not sore, just fatigued. Having never experienced that sensation before in my quads, I did some poking around the running websites as to the cause. Overuse. No duh. The why was because of placing too much of the running workload on the quads. Train for a marathon, you use your quads to get from the training run's beginning to the run's end, a long time later. So, how to fix it? I came across an article that suggested finding a gentle downhill, no more than one-three degrees in decline, with a distance of at least 300 yards to a half-mile in downhill length. Think fire road or a quiet stretch of a rural road, each on the downhill portion. Run downhill at a quick turnover, repeat several times. I started with four quarter-mile downhills on a two-percent grade. Immediately feeling a positive difference in my quads, two days later, I ran 12 of them at a quick pace. Not overly fast, but just fast enough to know I had a good turnover. The quad fatigue went away, never to return.

I own a treadmill. I bought it a decade ago. Where I live, there are days in the depth of winter when the icy roads make running outside hazardous. There are also days in the deep summer when the air is too thick, the heat too high, and the general exhaustion level too strong to attempt a run outside. Hence, the treadmill. The treadmill's range in speed is 0.1 miles per hour to 15 miles per hour. The incline goes as high as 12 degrees and the mill will decline to negative 3 degrees. More than a few marathon training blocks, I heavily utilized the decline feature in preparing my legs and hips for a marathon course with more decline than flat. I noticed each training block the positive response my legs fed back to me.

So, despite reading that an Achilles tendonitis requires rest, i.e., no running, I poo-pooed that notion. Okay, I chose to experiment with what I knew over what the experts offered. I got on the treadmill, hit a low speed, put the decline at zero, and ran cautiously. The first time. When I was done with the 30-minute endeavor, I stepped off the mill, gently stepped down, noticing that the Achilles wasn't barking at me and I wasn't wincing with the constant ache. I did the same routine the next day, only longer and slightly faster. After four days on the mill, I went for a run outside. The final learning mistake.

I chose not to run the three days before the half marathon, because of the constant reminder that the Achilles wasn't happy and because of both work and travel. During the prerace warmup and for the first mile, I noticed that the Achilles was tight and causing pain. After the forced fall through the finish, I was not thinking about the Achilles. I certainly was the rest of the day and the next. But I soon developed a training pattern of two days on the treadmill followed by one day running outside then back onto the treadmill. Repeat, ice, elevate. Following three weeks of this pattern, I noticed after a run outside as well as when walking down stairs, the tendonitis wasn't noticeable. The process works.

Of course, the dissipation in the constancy of the discomfort from the tendonitis coincided with the end of six weeks since the beginning of the injury. Almost 20 years ago, I developed plantar fasciitis. I learned that I could run on it but that the pain when awaking in the morning or just sitting would not go away for 12-13 months. So, when I changed running shoes a year into the syndrome and my plantar fasciitis went away after it appeared, the shoe purchase clearly was the remedy.

And so, the experiment of one continues unabated.