

A Senior Moment

Four men of a certain age dining in an upscale restaurant surrounded by others dining, also of that same certain age. Having discussed the topics of the day, their attention turned to mutual friends that one of them had recently seen.

“I saw Paul at the golf course,” said the one. “He plays nine holes a day now. He can only play with a cart. He can’t run anymore. Hasn’t run in almost 10 years.” Paul was the fastest in our running group, having qualified for the Olympic Trials.

“Sally saw me at a restaurant at the Mountain base area,” he went on. “She told me she and Dave no longer run. She spends a lot of her time playing with her grandkids now, hiking.” Sally did run at the trials, just missing an Olympic spot when she ran out of gas with a lap to go.

“John?” he repeated, repeating the inquiry aloud. “He’s great. Plays golf with me when I’m up there, goes to all his daughters’ events, busy with rehabbing their house, walks a fair bit.” John always led our mid-week pack on our running loops along the groomed base trails or on the five-mile loop of the park.

“Liz joined us for lunch while I was up there,” he recounted. “She just had her second hip replacement and hadn’t started up walking just then. She told me how much she really misses running. She joked that she would be happy if she could half-jog regularly.” Liz always pushed the boys in the group into running faster on our long weekend runs in the woods along the lakes. She never backed down.

He also told us that George’s heart condition required yet another massage of his heart to keep it reset. Geo can share a story in the middle of a fast surge on the track, a tempo on the roads, or in the middle of a race. He never stopped. There were runs when the group would fall apart, laughing too hard to continue. When he was not entertaining us, he could flat out run.

Sharing intel on each of the remaining members of our running gang from over three decades prior continued through the entrees and into my dessert and their decaf coffees. That was a time when we were all defining ourselves, just past the beginning of our respective careers. A period in our lives before marriage, families, professions, home ownership, and the baggage that comes with personal growth.

I call it the Houndstooth Chase Loop, or the Houndstooth for our purposes. I tried Chasing the Hounds Loop. Too long. The Chase didn't fit. The Tooth Loop was a flitting thought, not to be kept. Realizing that the Houndstooth Chase Loop just fit, that's its name, often shortened to the Houndstooth. And no, I have seen neither a hound nor a hound's tooth on the loop. Similar to all the running courses I have, it has both its own name and its unique reason for being in the rotation. Like all of my running loops, I don't run Houndstooth as often as my mind tells me I do. That alone makes this run a keeper.

The first and last miles of the six-mile loop are along the river meandering through the suburban city. The riverbed, lined with trees and bramble that hides the flat rock and the river's currents in the summertime, often flows at a low rate, just as often the waters pounds through raging forward. The use of this part of the path mirrors the small river. The path can be chock-full of runners, runners in packs too large for the path, and walkers, walkers with dogs, walkers in packs too large for the path. When there are walkers in packs with dogs and runners in packs, the scene can be chaotic. Somehow the various packs blend.

Sometimes, I'll see almost no other person using the river trail.

The second mile grinds slightly up to a railroad undercrossing before the path turns to the left out of the regional park and into the Houndstooth Chase subdivision, replete with oversized homes on oversized lots, with large grass yards front and back, but not as many trees as you would expect to see. The path, heavily evergreen tree-lined on both sides, splits the middle between mansions on the left becoming the slightly smaller homes of an adjoining subdivision and the Houndstooth Chase homes along the path to the right. Backyard pools, fire pits, gardens, tastefully done screened-in decks, bored dogs on the watch, darkened windows shielding the homes' interiors. All I know is pushing up the incline, leaning into the uphill portion of the run, gets me to the crest alongside the busy road at the top of the Houndstooth.

Then comes the best four miles of the run or any run for that matter.

The third mile begins up a steep, short incline still amidst the evergreens, a sharp righthand turn into a slight descent down the path paralleling the road, before another turn to the right onto the wide main road for the Houndstooth Chase

subdivision, dropping slightly down to a left hand turn onto a street before beginning the spine, a third of a mile gentle decline alongside a creek, the spine separating homes set back on each side of the creek. Don't ask questions, just push this ending part of the third mile.

The spine trail ends the third mile, emptying onto another street, with a crosswalk back onto the path that led to the top of the second mile. Heading back to the regional park, a left onto the path that splits the soccer fields on both sides, follow the trees to a righthand bend past the huge backyard pool with accompanying pool landscaping, past the children's playground, glance to the right seeing the soccer fields, the youth football field, the tennis courts, and the spacious restroom area, just before a lefthand turn next to another restroom with water fountains, an immediate right over the footbridge leading to another left to another left over a higher footbridge and back onto the path.

Over the final two miles, the Houndstooth loop is a slight decline, uninterrupted by traffic stops, cars, bicycles, or an uphill. A long, languid stretch on the asphalt-pave path, a numbered post every tenth of a mile, gently sweeping around a field, and then a straight shot down the to football field, under the railroad tracks, onto another field sweep, and into the last mile. Run the consistently-gentle decline. Run fast pas each numbered post. Run faster.

Use the energy from picking up the pace with each stride, the ease of lifting each stride into the next. Flow along the path, each stride ended with a light foot strike. Feel the lungs expanding the chest, the shoulders relaxed drop, the fingers of the hands gently brushing the hips. Catch up to the walker with the dog. Focus on the runner just ahead and now behind. Pass the walking group, oblivious until passed with a slight breeze. On the fly, see ahead of each turn, the short straight stretches, and the undulations on the path.

Run to the start/finish line. That's running. That's the Houndstooth.

I am slow. No longer do I run at 10 miles an hour or faster on a training run. Racing for overall placing ended long ago. I don't race for age division place. While the objective result is not the same, I race myself. Not as fast as I was. Faster than my future me, I race myself. And just as in my past, some days I finish in front of my goal, some days I regroup for another day. On all days, the effort feels the same.

The members of our long-ago running tribe would have flown over the Houndstooth, sucking in the air, taking turns being in front or pushing the pace from the rear. At times, we would have strung out in single file, regrouping to race the second half of the Houndstooth, dropping the hammer over the last two miles. We didn't back down from each other. We ran. No matter the course we ran, winning the day was to finish within earshot of the leaders' shoe strike. Sometimes my shoe strike could be heard, sometimes I heard another's shoe strike.

Now only I hear my shoe strike.