

Diego

January in Houston, Texas always looks cold. Of course, almost anywhere in the Country is cold in January. But not every major city puts its freezing weather on television display. Houston does through the Chevron Houston Marathon and Aramco Half Marathon are each held in the middle of January each year and shown on television. Though I don't live in Houston, because of modern technology, I can stream the local television station coverage on both my flat screen and on my computer. A hot cup of coffee, pancakes, and a bowl of fruit are required entry fees for viewing.

Viewing takes up a bit over two hours of my early morning on a Sunday. And there are commercials in between the excellent visual coverage of both the half marathon and the marathon racers and the knowledgeable commentary. Elite runners from around the globe and nationally come to race a flat, fast, flat, cold weather, flat course to run fast times. And, damn! Those elites are flat out fast. Road racing records are performed in Houston on that Sunday in January.

Since 1972, Houston has hosted the marathon, first through a looped course in Memorial Park, and then throughout the city beginning in 1978. Then the half marathon was added in 2002. In a few Olympic years, Houston served as the USA Olympic Marathon qualifying race. Year in and year out, Houston has a fast field for both genders in both races.

In the half marathon, finishing times for the male winners are usually just over or under one hour. That's 4:35-4:38 per mile pace, run continuously. That is elite. Which leads me to the 2024 Houston Half Marathon and one Diego Estrada, a 34-year old US runner. He finished fifth in 1:00:42, a 4:38 per mile clip, just seven seconds behind the winner. But that's not the reason we come to him.

His 2024 finishing time was two seconds faster than he finished the Houston Half in 2015. He followed up his Houston finish with a win at the USA 25km road race championship, winning in 1:13:09, 4:41 per mile pace, setting the American record. In high school, he raced two miles in 9:04, which is 4:32 per mile. Now, a decade and a half later, he holds those race paces for over an hour. But that's not why he is a

runner of interest. He matriculated through Northern Arizona University in 2011 through 2014. He then won 2014 USA Road 5k Championships, the USA Half Marathon Championship in 2015, his racing results ending in 2017, before this year's finished. That is why he is of interest.

He quit running. Twice. Physically exhausted from overtraining in the first phase of his professional career, he developed physical symptoms that slowed him. More to the point, he faced his own connection with running. He resumed running following quitting because he missed racing. He doesn't like running. He likes racing. The self-reflection to achieve that epiphany is painful, and strengthening. Though it may appear otherwise, that difference is not subtle.

Running has its own joys, gains, and results. The first step into a run after getting out the door is a win. Running short, long, slow, fast, all lead to the internal satisfaction emanating from just running. You run for yourself, growing from the experience of one day in a lifetime of running. You run daily, or almost daily, or occasionally daily, deriving the same sustained joy no matter how often.

Racing is a different animal altogether. There is only finishing first. Each step onto the road, the trail, the track, is another step to finishing in front of other competitors. Others judge you by your result. You judge yourself by the quality of the effort you put forth. That result is determined by your determination and your training, the training needed to produce the win. That training means running. Running is not racing. A racer tolerates running as training. Can't win if you don't train.

A racer focuses on workouts designed to make her faster, stronger, and mentally hardened. The easy runs are merely recovery to get to the next work block. It's a cycle defined by periodization with the aim of peaking at the right moment, a race. For some, it's a local race. And for some it's a larger regional race. For others, it's a national race. For just a handful, it's a global race.

A young racer wants to be the first to finish. A veteran racer seeks to secure the victory. A mature racer races to place. An old runner lines up to race for himself. I am now firmly in the old runner category. Now, however, I know why I run. Diego's

elite-level experience opened that door for me. While I may be a lifelong runner, I'm a racer, at heart, no matter the result.

For me, the process in preparing for racing is the dessert to my running. The anticipation three days before the current race of choice, when I glide to a stop following my quick, intense run, feeling the breathing through the chest lighten with each slowing step, I glance at my watch, reading the time split for my final segment of the run. Thinking to myself that the time bodes well for the upcoming weekend race, I walk to my car, letting the run's sweat warm me.

Two days out, working from my desk, busying myself with the tasks needed to be completed before I headed out of town, there will be no run today. Instead, the short, easy jog of a few miles was replaced with the tension from the necessary tasks lying on my desk. All the while, I mentally pack what I will need for the overnight trip. A short trip doesn't require much, but it does require that the correct clothing be, you know, actually packed.

The day before I pretend to work, review the following week's work calendar, and am out door to the car. The race expo awaits. One final check for race shoes, socks, race shorts, a long-sleeved race shirt and a short-sleeved one, running hat, sunglasses, running watch, and the appropriate warmup gear and post-race clothing, it's now time to get out of town. Best drive, every time.

The race expo follows my sliding into the town hosting the race, purposefully driving through the quiet downtown on a late Friday afternoon, locating the local convention center, finding parking, strolling into the main building to gather my race bib, race shirt, race bag (which I would read later that night as I unwound), purchasing some and a bit of race swag. Dinner immediately follows, usually a local favorite with an appetizer, a glass of wine, an entrée, and a dessert appropriate for a good night's sleep, and a contented tummy during the race.

The race itself is now a mishmash of emotions. Determining the best que in lining up, not too close that I am run over and not too far back that I do the running over. Pushing through the first mile or more in hopes of finding my race groove, so that I can focus on pace, rhythm, and, you know, actual racing against those around me or

just ahead of me. Working at racing a steady pace, hopeful that I can push the last third of the distance just a wee bit quicker.

Gone are the races when I lined up close to the front. I was taking no prisoners. I knew I'd be in the top five overall. I wasn't an elite. I couldn't win against sub-elites, but I could hold my own. I knew how to suffer for my craft, chest heaving, legs burning, mind-numbing headaches awaited me. The pain I caused myself was worthwhile and more healthy than other past times. I loved each and every race attempt.

That race feeling of pushing the limit is no longer in my short-term memory, replaced by effort without top-end speed or unmatched focus. No count of runners passed is cataloged in my brain. My dance space is now very small, no bigger than the runner I just passed or that just passed me. I'm that guy with the race bib on my race shorts trying to blend into the crowd without being tripped. Just a race number in a sea of other numbers.

I push my race pace for what it is. I'm not close to first and I'm not close to last, yet. I am above the middle and below memorable. The thought could be a melancholy one. Could be. Except for Diego Estrada, who is sufficiently mature to know he is a racer for as long as he can race to win. He has the big picture in focus, as he aims for the 2028 Olympic Summer Games. Only, I know something he doesn't.

A running partner once pronounced to me that once he could no longer run under 6:00 per mile pace, he would stop running. Seven knee surgeries and numerous knee injections later, he is still running, and his pace is much slower than his line drawn in the sand. For myself, I knew decades ago that my pace would slow. I knew I would keep running, frustrating at times though it is because I cannot help by compare and contrast. The alternative is less than ideal.

Were Diego to ask, I would encourage him to race now, race hard, race to win. Because when he finally slows, he'll still be running. He won't listen, but he'll remember. In the meantime, go Diego, race.