

Dust

Cresting the last hill along the ridge trail, we threw ourselves down the steep path, spraying up dust all along the path behind us. We were running too fast to feel the smog we created with each step. Each running step pounding into the dirt trail, sending the loose dust into the air, the skyborne dust didn't catch onto our socks much less our shoes. Had we thought to look, we would have laughed. We're faster than dirt. But we were too engrossed in keeping up with the other, each of us hurtling to the base of the trail, trying to gain a step on the other. First to reach the trailhead sign would win the declaration.

The finish of any of our runs required an arbitrary finish, usually determined in the last quarter mile of a run. "See that brown bush mixed with the green ones? That's our finish." I almost always just grunted and nodded. "See that third car with the broken headlights? That's our finish." Grunt. Nod. "See that woman standing by the bench in front of the water fountain? That's our finish." The woman moved. "Nope, she's not our finish." I spewed a quiet epitaph and accelerated away.

Today's finish, after a seven-mile run up to the tree-lined ridge overlooking the town, complete with deer sightings, raccoons passing over the path from a distance, and the sun warming our backs, was predetermined. It was the trailhead sign, which just happened to be next to our car and in the shade. We'd done this route before. Tomorrow's run would be on some other path with a different start and finish. We'd "discuss" that run's finish line tomorrow when we were close to the finish. One unilateral decision followed by the grunt and nod.

But that was tomorrow. Right now, flinging ourselves downwards, focused on the rocks, sticks, and butterflies on the path in front of us, there was no thought other than hanging on. The downhill wasn't so steep as our paces were too fast for the descent. A runner of a certain pace could rumble downwards, pushing the pace, feeling the power from the sustained acceleration. Just run, baby.

One of us ran shirtless and the other in the lightest t-shirt possible. The temperature was warm, but not oppressively so. On a cloudless late-afternoon day, unaccompanied by any wind, the mouth dry from the low humidity in the air, we had trudged up from the trailhead on the winding double-track path, gaining the ridgeline after a long gentle sway of switchbacks. Pausing for a brief moment when we

reached the ridgeline trail, we gathered in the view of the town below, seeing the constant movement of cars, people, and the rivers, each moving in imagined symmetry. "Let's go," came the command. We were off, into the meaty portion of the day's run.

The ridgeline trail was not on rugged terrain. Groomed from the government vehicles that kept it a solid, smooth road-wide path, the ridge continuing steeply up one side on our left, dropping rapidly into the brush on our right, as if one step off the trail would tumble you all the way into the town below. Unlike most ridgeline trails, this one was not only smooth, but it was also devoid of any real undulation. We were already high enough to prove our point that we could run to the ridgeline. That was run. Not a trudge, not a walk. We ran steadily and with strength to gain the ridgeline.

Now we reaped the benefit from the steady climb. Powering our way along the ridge, making the small wave to each hiker, runner, and cyclist that was headed from whence we came, the run's rhythm was locked in. One of us runs tall, knees barely bending while the other runs shorter, knees bent. Somehow, we managed matching stride for stride along the ridgeline for the next few miles, neither of us breaking their stride.

We were not racing one another. That tempo was done during a race. This run was done at a pace, practiced so many times before by the two of us, knowing we could keep up with one another at whatever pace we put down. There was no strain in our expression. In fact, we were placid in appearance. There was only the matched pace, differentiated by the stride length. One seemed to dig into the dirt based on his knee lift, but in reality he left only a small footprint in the dirt. The other seemed to glide just above the dirt path, but in reality from each foot strike more dirt flew up in his wake.

There is grace in runners of certain age hitting their stride on a training run. The poetry cannot be missed, whether they are running towards you or past you as you run the other direction. Their flow is quiet power, stemming from slackened facial features, relaxed shoulders supporting their comfortable arm swings, hips moving pulled gently by the forward lift of the knees, leading to a graceful touching of the ground before them, bringing the opposite leg into play, repeated such that it becomes a dance. Runners at pace gobble up the ground before them. From their stride, there is

consistency of purpose. The moment is now. One of us just off the left shoulder of the other, we ran in our silent, collective grace.

Cresting the last hill along the ridge trail, we threw ourselves down the steep path, spraying up dust all along the path behind us. Far down the gently winding path, we could see the trailhead. So close and yet so much downhill running on the path before our finish. We took turns leading into one gentle sweep into the next. It felt like auto racing in running shoes. Decelerate into the curve, push out of the curve, accelerate rapidly onto the straightened path before taking the lead into the next curve, a continuous undulation down. There was no looking up or outwards.

The trailhead beckoned, a final half-mile long straight portion of the path, now only slightly downhill. One of us pulled into another gear, that speed usually saved for racing. No words were spoken but it was “go” time. The natural consequence of feeling one’s oats after succeeding in running the miles leading to now. There was no drafting off the shoulder of the other. One swung wide enough and they were now two abreast, speeding to the finish.

The joy of pure running is running fast. Doesn’t have to be done often. Spontaneity is the key. On a solo run, that moment pops up at any time on the run, or not. On a run of two, the smell of the barn, accompanied by natural inclinations to be faster than the other, usually kicks in at some point in the last mile. Or maybe it is the entire last mile. Upon finishing, nothing will be said, but that result will not be forgotten, stored away for the next run. It’s Katie bar the door time.

Strides changed, each now running just short of a sprint, their faces finally showing strains from the increased pace, the legs finding the rapid leg turnover so necessary to speed. their shoulders remained relaxed while the cupped hands reached out a little bit further, supporting the increased stride length and the rapidity of the steps. Before them, in the moment, was the ever closer trailhead sign. There was nothing else. In the moment.

We each slapped the trailhead sign. Finished. Slowing to a stop, taking an immediate inventory of how we felt, we realized that we were almost dry, with just a bit of post-run glisten. The dry air reducing apparent sweat during the run and eliminating it quickly following the run was on par for where we were running. The post-run water still tasted great as did the shared stories of what each of us witnessed during the run, and of course, our pacing. A perfect result. A good run to remember.

Today was not that day. Early morning in June. Mid-June. Accompanied by a heat wave. A heat wave devoid of any overnight cool air. Cool air is now a distant memory until after Labor Day. Labor Day is much too distant in mid-June. There is July hot. There is August hot. There is even Fall heat. None of those are June. June heat doesn't just amble in. It announces itself with authority. It takes over and takes no prisoners.

The air feels uncomfortable to the touch. There is liquid in the air. Deep humidity has arrived. The dew point – the temperature at which water droplets can condense on plant vegetation – is way too high. The hot air is holding more water than it should. On this pre-dawn run, the air weighs on my shoulders like an anvil. Come the rest of summer, this feeling will dissipate. But today's run is done in June. Mid-June. It's gonna be ugly.

And it was. I started out slow and during the 13 miles of my planned weekend long run, my pace became slower. I carried a water bottle, at each water stop consuming the water it contained, refilling the bottle to have enough water to get me to the next water stop. I purposefully chose this course for this morning. Purposefulness doesn't remove the heat, or the humidity, or the reduce the dew point. Did I mention there were no clouds and that the sky did its damndest to infiltrate the shaded running path I was using?

Survival. The run became a survival run from the first mile onto the last. I included hills in the first three miles, because the heat had not yet taken complete control. Diving into the shaded path for the remaining 10 miles, feeling the heat turn completely oppressive with each step away from my car, I continued on, carrying what felt like an 80-pound backpack while wearing heavy boots. And that was during the "faster" miles. The second half of the run became a mental test of wills between my will to run and my will to quit. The car's location and the post-run brunch each helped me to keep running.

Running in June is important for the only reason that June running acclimates me for running in July and August. Running in July and August prepares me for the joy of running in the Fall. Remember Fall running? Neither do I. Tomorrow, I'll start my next dawn run, include some intervals, and then ensconce myself indoors. The day after that, I'll run easy in the same heat. And at no time will I see dust. Too damned hot for dust.