

## A Breath

Eyes up, neck resting on relaxed shoulders, arms pumping gently in small arcs, fingers circled with palms open and the index fingers barely touching the thumbs, with a slight forward lean from the hips, the knees alternating lifting and falling, each stride reaching forward, ending with one foot touched the running path just as the other began the endless rhythm of his running. Only it was different.

This morning, in this July race, he found a moment. He glided along the path, gently weaving around others who were slowing down after their initial burst from the start line. He wasn't thinking about his form or his form's fall from grace. Focused on the runner just a stride in front of him, he was feeling the rush from running fast and the power in pushing his pace. He controlled the moment.

The almost ideal 5km road race. A race run out and back on a flat asphalt path alongside a small stream, completely shaded by the heavy tree growth along the stream's banks from the early morning sun, a slight, gentle decline to the turnaround followed by a gentle incline on the same track on the way back to the finish. On that path, this morning, he raced alongside less than 80 other runners.

Still air, remnants of warmth from yesterday not cooled down by the summer night, they all charged from the start line at the sound of the horn. A chaotic jumbled mass of fast legs, churning legs, shuffling legs, and strolling legs all left the start line en masse and at different speeds. As with any running race, there are those who are slow who start in front of others who are faster. Organically, the jumbled mass sorts itself out within the first few hundred yards, but not without focused consternation in avoiding body to body crashes.

Within the first quarter mile he found his racing rhythm, no longer glancing quickly about him for wayward runners. Now staring directly in front of him, realizing he was running directly behind one runner and just alongside another, he could relax his mind, allowing his training to take the reins in leading his brain. For once, the brain was more than willing to enjoy the ride.

The path followed the gentle bends offered from the river, sometimes curving to the right, other times to the left. Always was the path protected by the dense shade given by the riverside trees. Wearing no hat, eyes covered by clear-lensed sunglasses

protecting his vision from the summer bugs, his little pack of three progressed along nicely, no one passing them while they left others in their wake. Only long after the race was done and he was headed home did he flash back to another race, long distant in his past.

. . . But for the other two running on each side of him, he would be leading the race just over a mile into the lollipop loop course. Giving one another elbow room, they matched strides along the treelined closed road, sustaining race speed towards the roundabout turn back to the finish. They would be under the sun only circling the roundabout. That's when the race would turn to the serious business of who would win the day.

Separating themselves within the opening strides of the race from the rest of the runners who lined up at the start, they took advantage of the wide-laned closed road in running their own direct route to the turnaround, using the side-slipstream of the others so unique to road racing. Sensing rather than seeing a surge by one of them, the others silently matched the increased pace. For the most part, they simply raced for the return.

His eyes seeing only ahead, his neck resting on his relaxed shoulders, his arms pumping gently in small arcs, reaching out just far enough to propel his feet forward, his hands ever so lightly circling into his open palms, and his index fingers barely touching his thumbs, he ran with a slight forward lean from his hips, his knees lifting his feet for the start of each rapid stride's reach forward, ending with the lightest touching of the road, just as the other leg continued the endless rhythm of his running. Only it was different.

That morning, in that race, he was racing for the win. The moment for him would come at the finish. His effortless strides matching the effortless strides of the other two alongside him. The barrel-chested one ran short and squatty, the tall, lean other run ran tall, clawing the ground with each of his strides. All three of them ran fast. And each were racing to win. Something had to give.

The first gift came at the roundabout when the tall one's inner ankle collapsed momentarily. Recovering, he slipped in behind the other two, just a half stride behind. But it was a half stride behind. A half stride that the tall runner never gave up and that he never overcame. Into the return they raced.

The second gift arrived when he felt a surge of strength into the last half-mile of the race, still running alongside the barrel-chested runner and just a breath ahead of the taller runner. Running stamina in action is a result of repeated efforts in training on short rest. Think of a lap of the track with a half-lap jog. Think of running a dozen of those in one training session. Think of running that same session repeatedly over the course of three months' time. You learn not to think. Only to do.

The mental part of road racing comes in the last part of the race, in this instance, the last half mile of the 3.1-mile distance. Do you want to race fast to the finish? Are you willing to be uncomfortable in slightly increasing your pace to stay with, catch up to, or pull ahead of the runners around you? Have you trained yourself in the fine runner's art in relaxing just as you begin to muscle your way to the finish you want? Have you trained yourself to achieve your race goal? All to say, it comes down to how bad do you want it?

His leg lift was just a bit higher, which led to a longer stride, which led to a quicker turnover. All of that resulted in his being faster, just a titch faster than the other two. He felt the strength, adjusted to the subtle changes in his stride, slowly inched ahead, before moving a half-step ahead, before taking a full stride lead into the last straightway. Never looking back, he held that lead into a win . . .

On the way back in from the turnaround at the pickup truck parked at 1.55 miles in this morning's race, one runner passed him. His mile pace slowing slightly on the way back. He had no surge. There was no one for him to draft on his way back. Defaulting into his "dig it out and get to the finish" racing mode, he did just that.

A runner of a certain retirement age, now just a bit above average, can only realize little while expecting so much. There is no acceptance in the effort. Too many memories get in the way of settling for less than his best. Knowing he shouldn't get in the way of younger, stronger, faster runners is key. That has required a new way of him viewing his racing, having to develop the ability to race from behind, catching and passing when he is able, rather than pushing and powering from the front.

This race on the shaded path along the river finishes with a wide, gentle clockwise curve, the finish line in the sun visible from over a quarter mile away. He could see the runner who passed him. He could the see the finish line. He knew he could hold

his pace to the finish. He finished into the shade between the shaded parts of the path.

Grabbing a water bottle offered at the finish line, he walked onto the shaded footbridge over the river and onto the parking lot. Changing out of his race shoes, glancing at the inner-midsole on one of the shoes, the shoe that would normally scuff the inner side of the other shoe, he realized he had not noticed him scuffing one shoe to the other at any point in the race. Progress.

Come to think of it, he thought to himself, he didn't take one moment at any point in the race over whether he could maintain his balance. Not at the start, the narrow sections early in the race, going down the two short underpasses, or when he passed or was passed during the race. More composed thought led him to realize the balance issue had apparently improved. Progress.

Driving home after stopping for the post-race latte, with vanilla this time, he pondered how he could extend that moment in the race when he floated along the course. Rhetorically, he asked himself aloud, "how do I hold my pace for longer?" Stamina. Running stamina. Practiced stamina. Nothing less sexy in running than stamina training. Other than recovery runs repeated day after day.

Stamina through repeats on short rest. Run in a park, on a running path, on the track, on the road. A set distance with a set recovery. The variable being the pace. Hard at first to complete the set task, over repetition over weeks and months' time, the same pace becomes easier. Don't need to think it through. Just do. Consistently. No one will be watching. But he would know.

Sometime in the future, in a distant race, he would realize the payoff from his stamina efforts. He'd take an unneeded breath, just a little one, before he realized he didn't need that breath. He needed only to relax his breathing, keep running at his new pace, and look forward. He only needed to do.