

## August

Over an hour into my long run, a slight darkening surrounding me caught my attention. I glanced up into the still early morning sky. Clouds. With friends. High, thin clouds. Just enough to throw a soft, thin blanket above my run along the river trail. Enhancing the sun's dawning, the cloud cover also effectively reduced the overheated feeling well into my long run from the continuous beatdown of the sun. Actually, the cloud cover brought a seeming sense of comfort. Who knew?

This morning's run is the culmination of a full spring and summer's baked-in heat, built from the daily grinding of the hot sun casting its heat net far wide, early and late, day after day. After day. Humidity causing the clothing option for the run to stick to the skin, even before exiting the car. Humidity and heat causing the running shoes to gain water weight, leading to the eventual aroma of dried out wet shoes by this time of the long summer. Sunscreen slathered about the body bringing its own scent to mix in, sunglasses in a state of permanent fog from the word go, and as light of clothing attire as can be found in the running drawer, all add to the joyless long run.

This morning, there was something different in the feel of the run. There was an inkling of freedom from the oppression of the weather elements. I didn't feel the usual beatdown from the high dew point, the ever-increasing temperature, or the steady weight from the humidity. The run became nicer the further into it I went. The run became, well, just a run. The run wasn't a fast run necessarily, but it was a run replete with sustained drive and pace. The feeling came much like seeing a long lost friend for the first time in forever.

The cloud cover hid from view the usual pounding sun and the overheating effect that comes with a summer's long run. The shade provided from the trees along the running path on both sides felt to double the positive effect of shelter from the usual early morning beatdown. Unimpeded by the constant anvil of summer's heat, humidity, and high dew point, the graceful strides of a long run flowed back into my running. That feeling had been missed.

Will it last the rest of summer? This is mid-August. Fairs are ongoing. Fairs bring heat. It's written in the contract. August is hot. While we tend to forget its intensity, as soon as it arrives, we no longer forget. To ourselves, we reissue our "it's okay to run slower" cards, just to get through a run to get to the next one that leads to fall . . .

Whoever thought that a marathon in August through the foothills of Lake Tahoe that lead down to Carson City, Nevada was clueless. Or, so I thought race morning. Yes, the air was dry. Yes, the air was cool. Yes, the high sky touching the foothills covered in Ponderosa pine, the sun streaming through the myriad forested areas, were all breathtaking. What's your point?

We camped overnight, the air cool enough to sleep amongst the stars, stars so bright and numerous, we kept looking for the switch to turn them off long enough to get more than fitful sleep. Eventually, we fell asleep, just as the sun nudged away the stars, helping us find our morning's pre-race grub. Not that we knew much about pre-race nutrition, much less that an August marathon wasn't the best of choices. We were in college. Need I say more?

We did know how to run and we did know how to eat. Occasionally, we did both at same time. What was missing at our age was the fusing of the brainwaves into a recognizable pattern. Running together that summer, we had talked ourselves into taking a few days up to Lake Tahoe and adding in a marathon. We were young, inquisitive, and ignorant. We threw clothing, a tent, sleeping bags, and assorted camping gear into his dad's car and we were off. Indeed, we were.

Located at the base of Washoe Lake on the Nevada side, the race hub was overflowing with marathoners who also lacked brain cells sufficient to conjure up the thought that running this marathon was not the best choice of an idea to put into practice. As with us, no one had disabused them of the idea that only bad outcomes could come of this. We checked in, got our race bib, and headed for the nearest facility. It was pre-race after all.

I will tell you that in the early morning of mid-summer, along the eastern ridge of the Sierra Nevada range, the smell of the pine coupled with the lingering cool of the dry evening, leaves a never to be forgotten scent. We raced breathing in that aroma for 26.2 miles. We could taste that perfumed air, almost like we were holding a candle scented with that fragrance. If only actual candles with that aroma. Oh, wait.

Carrying the dry, cool air on our run, the course looping on rural asphalt roads, the sun continuing its dance amongst the trees foresting our way, we found our rhythm almost immediately. Holding that pace for the next couple of hours, we were living proof of marathon innocence. We were just going to run.

Rural marathons, whether in the mountains or in small counties, have in common the almost surreal quiet surrounding the run. Almost as if you were dropped by helicopter onto the course. Broken only by the water stations and the other runners distantly spaced around you, the silence becomes its own white noise. The breeze through the trees, the birds flitting about, the occasional stream, all add to the silence. Spectators make a city marathon. Silence carries the morning in small-town courses.

Running stride for stride for over 20 miles, we commented to ourselves how quiet was this morning's run. We took up a good 10 miles trying to recall the make and model of the last car either of us remembered seeing. We also noticed that we were not slowing down. And we noticed we were passing runners who had been ahead of us from the beginning. We had goals.

Break three hours. Despite the elevation above sea level, the air was still thick enough to run our usual race pace. Use this marathon as a springboard to another where we would run faster. That was always the goal: build a foundation upon which we would expand our limits. The next one would be our BQ. First, there was finishing this one.

Somewhere in the last 5 miles, we grew apart. He slowly pulled away while I slowly faded behind him. Turns out, I didn't slow down. He got faster. I continued to pass runners over those last miles, he simply passed them before me. The course gently wound along connecting roads, no big ups or downs. When we passed the mile 25 marker, we both accelerated. He just did it faster, finishing one spot and just over a minute faster finishing time. we were both under three hours.

At that age, we never realized that running an August marathon was an issue. We knew we were racing in August. We knew we'd be racing 26.2 miles. We knew the race effort would be hard. We never thought about the heat of summer. Knowing and thinking are not the same. Granted, Mr. Pinette, it was a dry heat, but it was merely a dry heat. And, we were young and fit.

Have you ever seen a young, trim, fit runner who looks slow running in summer heat? Neither have I. They are still prancing effortlessly off the road with every foot strike. They are not breathing heavily, even when they are in full discourse with their running

friends while lightly touching the ground in keeping their fast paces. At my age now, I loathe them. We'll compromise and call my loathing pure, unadulterated envy.

Know longer living even remotely close to Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Nevada's, or the West Coast, and being much older, with just a hint of wisdom brought on by aging, I have given into summer running realities brought on by heat, humidity, and dew point. When you are a runner and one of those three are suddenly in your daily vocabulary describing your run, being in touch with reality is a good thing. Saves lives. Less filling.

I've learned through hard teaching lessons on a daily basis that heat, humidity, and dew point, make you slow down. Running in dry heat merely requires a resolute mindset. Running in humidity can be fun if the warm, summer rain is falling on you. Running in high dew point required finding a treadmill. That is ugly. Running with all three requires not only slowing down, but carrying an anvil, wearing weights around your ankles, and settling for awful.

Then comes a morning run like today's run. Gentle warmth refusing to be turned into sweltering heat. Sultry air discarding any thought of becoming too thick and hot to breathe. Foliage that dries with the gentle warmth. You would almost think it was a normal day in the fall. It's a hint. My treat to myself for getting up at o'dark thirty to run long.

I am now promised the close proximity of lesser heat, lower humidity, and no dew point discussion. I can almost taste the cooler air, feel the dryer clothing on my person, and enjoy the renewed strength in my running. I'll be faster in pace, smoother in stride, joyous in the effort. I'll remain too far behind the other running kids to have any conversation but an internal monologue, but the content will be happier. Maybe that's why the best marathons are in the fall and late winter.

Of course, none of those happy thoughts towards the immediate future will make me faster for the real August runs. August does come to its reputation through experience. Why else do entire countries take vacation for all of August. And, while fall follows August, so do the late autumn winds from the north. Those are as awful to run in as hot August day.

It's always something.