

## Directions

On a particular Sunday morning, Charley and I were running the first mile of a 10km on a flat, rural road, within a quiet rural town. We were aiming to run six-minute per mile pace, or 37:12, something I hadn't accomplished early in my running travels. The course was out three miles from the town's only park, turn around, back in the opposite direction the same three miles, and then a final .2 in the park. The starting line was also the mile-6 mark, making the mile-1 mark the same as the mile-5 mark. Miles two and four shared their own mark, and mile three was the turnaround.

The course was not difficult. All on asphalt-paved road, with barely an undulation along the way out, or the way back for that matter. At mid-morning, the day was very bright, sunny, no wind with just a hint of a breeze from the north. That's why we chose this race. We were running for validation that we could hang six six-minute miles consecutively without stopping, plus a little bit more. Fortunately, the course was not run directly into that sun. I did not wear sunglasses then and squinting for that long a race is overrated.

Charley and I gently progressed in the opening mile, getting around those who would finish behind us and trying not to slow those that we would finish behind. Just over a couple of minutes into the race, we had secured our spot in the race. As is my want, I began noticing out of my periphery the cute homes with tidy yards, no dogs to be found, and no one wanting to impede our race with their bad ass trucks on the road. There was one guy reading his Sunday morning paper, sitting in his lawn chair in his front yard as we passed. Seems in every race I've ever run there's always a guy sitting in a chair in his front yard reading a newspaper. It's a thing.

Sensing we were close to the first mile mark, I went through the runner's internal checklist: breathing was easy, no tired legs, shoulders were relaxed, arm swing was gentle, mind was almost in the game. The pace seemed quick but sure. Ah! The first mile mark approached! I knew this because I could hear someone calling out the first-mile split. Nothing gets past me. "5:10"! Oh, shit.

Knowing that my running 32:38 in this race for 6.2 miles was not a good idea, but uncertain how to digest this new information, I snapped my head towards Charley, gave him a long, hard stare, asking him, "Now what"? He was more experienced in distance running at that point in time. I knew from training with him he'd have the

perfect answer. He seemingly always did when it came to how fast, how far, the whys and why nots. He never seemed to be out of sorts, much less flustered. He didn't return my stare. From his response, I instantly knew I was on my own for the remaining five miles. He, in turn, faded away, but only after he responded with, "Oh, well."

Argh.

For the longest time, I ran without a running watch. On my way out the door for a run, I would glance at the mantle clock. When I returned, I would do the same. I chose my running route the same way, running down or up a road until the road intersected with another, then I would turn. While I got to know my neighborhood and the ones surrounding my neighborhood, the distance for any single run was dictated by my sense of time. I would, occasionally, look at a street map, get into my car, drive the route if I could, adjust for length, attempting that running route with a wee bit more knowledge than I had from merely winging it. It worked.

Until I discovered hill repeats, the track at the local community college, and racing. I also noticed that other runners had a black watch strapped on their left wrist. I found a magazine with an advertisement for a running watch, soaked in the visual of the watch, read the description of what it would do in helping me run, and then thought it over. That's what a guy does. He shops, first. He thinks over his potential purchase. Then, he is ready to close the deal, it has to be done right there and then, on that day, at that hour.

It was a Casio digital running watch. It gave me running time, and if I wanted, it could take splits. It also did my laundry and cleaned my dishes, but that was the deluxe model and there were not many of those. Not really knowing what splits were, I played with it on my next run. I started the watch, ran to the first big corner, pressed the split button, continued to the next turn, hit the split button, repeating that process all the way back home. Stopping the running time on the watch at the door was a new experience. The basic loop that I thought took me just over 30 minutes, actually was less. That was nice.

Unbeknownst to me, I also developed an internal sense of distance. The turn at the first big corner was just over a mile. The sweeping turn along the winding road that followed where the big ass evergreen stood was two miles, followed by the mile

three at the gas station sign. The gas station was always busy so I had to do the quick glance at the watch while keeping the lookout for cars flying into the gas station. Mile four was home. On my Sunday morning “long” run, I knew that running to the small lake close to my house was just under two miles, once around the lake was just under four miles, and the longer route home was just over four. How did I know this? I knew from the watch my basic training pace from racing and running on the quarter mile oval track. More to the point, I simply knew. Oh, and the sign to the lake said, “Two Miles” and the sign map at the lake showed the loop to be four miles. That kind of knowledge source always helps.

Years – decades, actually – later, GPS watches came out. Initially, after standing in one place for three days to acquire the satellite connection with the watch, the watch gave me time, my splits when wanted, and a close approximation of my distance run. It sat large and heavy on my right wrist. It felt and looked awkward. And, it wasn’t cheap. While it opened up doors to more exact workouts and runs, it also taught me that my sense of distance was damned accurate.

Then the GPS technology merged with the smart phone technology and included everything and anything that would “improve one’s life.” So, I bought a smart watch designed for running that gave me access to music, if I wanted, while I ran. I never have turned on that feature. Quick digression: over a decade ago, I stopped my short-lived interest in listening to music when I ran. I didn’t need to fret over the music choices or the occasional glitch in the listening device. I just wanted to get in a run. Also, I don’t carry my cellphone on my runs.

When the question arose for those of us who started running when in days before GPS watches, indoor plumbing, flatscreen tv’s, and running-focused social media, as to how we knew our running distances, the universal response was, “we just knew.” And, we still know. How do I know today what I knew decades ago? Because in high school, my classmates voted me “Most Likely to Survive on a Deserted Island.” That’s how.

Took me awhile, but my putting my runs on a social media site for runners is not for me. I don’t need the world knowing my every run, how I felt about that run, what I ate during the run, or where I took a pitstop on the run. The world doesn’t need to see my daily run distances, routes, splits, or photos taken during the run. I don’t want the stress of keeping up. It’s just a run. No, that’s not it. It’s my run. I need to know.

Of course, when I wear my GPS running watch, which I long ago linked to my running-focused social media site, the basic information of my run shows up for the world to see. Distance, pace, heart rate, route, weather, and how my running effort compares to my current running shape and how to improve it. Others are welcome to see it, when I wear that watch, but I'm not looking. Do you want to share in my running? Come run with me.

I came to this conclusion because my usual running pace is slowing and I just like knowing how I am running. One day, when I finished an easy, purposeful slow run and I saw my cellphone bombarded with attaboys and congrats, I'd had enough. I found my decades-old Casio running watch, had the battery changed, and run with that watch almost exclusively. Old school is writing down at mile splits, the interval splits, the route, and the weather. Turns out I actually missed doing that and I still like writing all that down. In a running log. In my home. The running log sitting on a bookshelf next to 46 other running logs.

In that race with Charley so long ago, I wasn't wearing a running watch. I also didn't know that courses weren't always the distance advertised and that mile markers were usually a rough guess taken from a car odometer. The running watch was the only factor I could control. So, I solved that challenge. Come to think about it, there was another 10km race that I ran every year for a decade that was so much fun to do that I ignored the known fact that it was over six miles but not quite 6.2 miles. I just raced it for the short but steep uphill portions and the long, sweeping downhills that followed. Run in the perfect time of year, along rural roads to which homes with beautiful gardens sat alongside, aided by picturesque views from afar, it was simply fun racing on that course.

In those last five miles back to the park, while Charley stayed the course behind me, I kept up the pace, passing more runners than those who passed me. I ignored the other mile markers, my ignorance made easier by the fact that there were no other persons calling out times. I ran. I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could. I turned into the park, saw the finish line just a bit further in the distance. I also saw the official digital clock for the race, something new to local races. It read "36:17." I knew how to sprint and I did. I wanted that six-minute per race mile reward. Crossing the finish line, I looked up at that clock. Mic drop.

"36:57."