

Respect

Every mid-July, they come like cicadas late to the dance, showing up in ones or twos at first, and then in small packs, before surging into the late summer in large defined groupings. Though they seemingly appear in different shapes and sizes, they are predominantly lean, mean running machines.

Always in the opposite direction.

The oppressive morning sun shining on their tanned skin, I see them running towards me on the same shared running path, my route taking me past their high school, they starting out from it. Each of their strides is in length and in rhythm, their skin glistening from the heat of the early morning but not from effort. Their eyes are bright, their running shoes either brand new or well-worn from training. Not a belly amongst them, their future is only as far as the first team cross-country race.

The lead group is always led by the upperclassmen, shirtless in the intense summer heat, each with serious expressions while leading the younger teammates, each of whom wear the frightened facial expression that they may be left behind. That's how the older ones train the ones to follow. Keep up or be dropped. The team leaders run flawlessly, each stride gobbling up the path before them. Toned, honed, and eager to go onwards on their route as quickly as needed. This is their time.

And, always somewhere in that lead group of 25 boys is a girl, noticed only because there is a hole in the pack when looking above the shoulders. There it is! It's a shorter girl. She runs easily amongst the giants surrounding her, longer hair waving with each stride, focused on her surroundings. On these runs, she is one of the group. No big deal.

I am barely acknowledged in my passing.

Directly behind that lead group comes the younger boys, new to the program, to long-distance running, or both. They are even quieter, trying hard to look the part and run the talk. From their facial expressions, they are hanging on, as if waiting for the final verdict of their day's sentence.

They do return my wave.

Following but not behind, are the girls running in their own pack, separate from the boys, the conversation freely flowing, the running strides smoother if a wee bit slower. The smiles are even fewer as I pass. They are running for themselves, separate from the boys. Their practiced grouping flows along the path – that would be the entire path. If running two abreast is acceptable, running four abreast and taking over the path is better.

My being forced off the path does not concern them, in the slightest.

Just as I pass the thundering herd of runners of all speeds, running forms, and intensity, I happen upon the youngest ones, both boys and girls. The frosh. They clearly have the look of following coach's orders to "just try to run the entire distance of the morning run or warm up before the real work begins," from their coaches. They look lost. Don't we all, at times.

I always wave and tell them they are running great.

For the last decade, I've run this path, the spine of my mid-week 90:00 run, from the trailhead to the historic house (and restroom/water) down the spine to the high school-middle school-elementary school hill, through the very large apartment complex, across the road adjoining the high school and onto the bridge over the quiet river, into any or all of four quiet neighborhoods (no restrooms/water), and back up the spine to the trailhead.

In the fall, winter, and spring, I share the path with pedestrians, dog walkers, and the occasional solo runner going opposite my direction. I see the leaves change color, fall to the ground, and the trees bud. I feel the quiet in the air, taste the cooler air, feel the lightness in my legs, imagining I am still fast enough to have a pace. I feel as if I almost own the path, albeit for a brief moment. In the summer, that all changes with the coming of the high school cross-country runners.

The first few years I encountered them, I was treated much like we treat insects that get too close. Their reluctant waves mirroring more of a swat than a greeting. They

gave up just enough of the path to keep from forcing me into the grass, the dirt, or the mud. They found my presence on their path less than worthy.

Three years ago, that changed, when one of the runners from the younger boys group said, “runner up, double file,” just loud enough for his compatriots to hear before adjusting their spacing. They moved into two-by-two formation, giving me half the path. It wasn’t a one-off. This repeatedly, with every passing run that summer, became a moment in their run. I could see they were assessing their increasing running speed with where they ran past me.

Two years ago, led into it by the now sophomore runner, seeing me coming toward the lead boys group of which he was now a part, I heard him say clearly and firmly, “single file, runner up,” and they swiftly with assured strides, moved into single-file group running formation, one behind another for as far as I could see. I lifted my left hand in recognition, staying as far on the path from them as I could.

But this morning, I experienced something new.

Every third or fourth weekly run on the spine, I’ll get the itch to run fast. I’ll break up the run into segments from a half mile to three-quarters of a mile with jogging rest in between. Just cuz. This was one of those mornings. Cool and not as oppressively humid for a mid-summer morning, I wanted to fly. This morning, it was four three-quarter mile repeats on the path. I was on my third repeat when I could see them in the distance, each pack running towards me as I ran towards them.

The varsity boys came upon me, first. I saw that the once freshman, ne sophomore, now junior, was leading the way. Alongside him were three other runners of equal running ability. Each confident, fearless, pushing the others to keep up with their powerful running. I was just trying to feel like I could run fast.

What happened next was so fast, so spontaneous, I was floored.

Just within talking distance, I heard the now junior with a leader’s intonation in his voice, bellow the word, “Respect”!

It was uttered clearly, crisply, and as a definitive command. Upon hearing that directive, the lead group seamlessly aligned themselves into a double-file running platoon, leaving me half the path to complete my segment unimpeded. Without looking over, I heard different voices yell out:

“Good work!”

“Way to run, sir!”

“Don’t let up!”

“Nice, relaxed stride!”

“You got this!”

“All the way!”

And so forth. And each group after that followed suit. I felt the surge in my stride and the ease of my effort from the encouragement shouted at me from the lead boys’ pack, the next pack, the lead girls’ pack, the girls group that followed. And the middle school kids, just trying to hang on, looked at me, and smiled or waved.

I kept my facial expression neutral and still. But inside my head, I was both supercharged and giggling. I really didn’t think they had ever noticed that I simply didn’t show up to run slowly on the path. Finishing my repeat segment, slowing to a jog, I looked back, but they were all long gone into their own running for the morning. Turning away from my backwards glance, continuing my jug recovery into my final repeat, I kept the smile.

Sometime later, after they finished their day’s running, I pictured someone in that community of high-school runners, stepping into the middle of their circle, raising a hand, from which a microphone dropped. ‘nuf said.