

## Analyze This

It was a great run. For me. At this point in my running life. Early September. Crack of dawn. The weekend long run. Three hours, no more, no less. Solo. Last marathon run of the training block.

Wearing a high-tech running shirt, specifically designed for hot summer days; wearing 2-in-1 running shorts with the correct style of pockets for holding nutrition, gels, and my car fob; wearing incredibly light double-layer socks inside my current pair of long-distance training flats. I was ready for the “last long run.” Seeing the morning’s first rays filtering through the trees across the road from the parking lot, stepping away from my car, I took my first stride, after ensuring the car was locked.

Okay, my first quarter mile were walking strides, but it was well before six a.m. I added a few more dynamic exercises in that power walk, augmenting my exercises performed back at the car. Coming to the official start/finish line for this run, I set the running watch to run time, pressed the button Max, and away I went.

For this morning’s run, starting in crisp fall air before turning warm to warmer with each hour’s passing, I’d chosen a varied route. 18 miles or three hours, whichever came first. Today, magically, the two would meet in a cosmic convergence. But first, the first mile. I’m now a man of a certain age, that age being 65. Opening miles are no longer bursts off the start line. So, despite my best opening-mile effort, I was 1:43 slower than I expected.

A short expletive from me and I was into the first neighborhood, around the oversized senior living facility, back through the first neighborhood, out along the river trail into the second neighborhood with its extensive trails and expansive homes, into the regional park with its rolling hills, out to the historic school, that route having its rolling terrain, and back. Three hours later, each mile juuuuuust a bit quicker than its predecessor, my feet found the start/finish line.

The morning was now officially hot, my run clothing soaked, my tummy screaming for breakfast. My morning’s run was a great run, a good run in what would have been oppressive weather just weeks before. No one else around the many cars owned by other runners, I basked in the sweetness of my moment. I may be that tree falling in the forest, but I made a sound and I heard it. Both were good.

By profession for better parts of five decades, I am an analyzer of solutions looking for problems. My academic training has led me to solve conundrums for the benefit of others. I'm good at it. Taking up the challenge others bring to me, I know how to bore into the tall, overgrown weeds, pulling out the variety of flowers beneath that are each a part of the solution. The career has its moments.

By nature, I am a tweaker of ideas. Why could I not use that tool, thought, decision, in a different way. Would I not have a solution to the challenge at hand, regardless that others would despair me that tweak? We'll protect the cats and simply agree that there is no rigidity in focused experimentation. Ideas are always good, unless they are proven otherwise when put into practice. And, of course, there is only one means of testing a theory.

By lacing up my running shoes daily, I know two things: I wish to run and I know where I am going. It's the how I get there and back that is the sweet challenge in my head. I cannot imagine running the same route, or the same out and back, day after day, or even daily. So much to see and so little time in which to do it. The true joy of running is in the viewing.

The mystery of the day's run is whether I will run fast or easy. Is it a day to run short repeats on a track or trail? Could it be the day to run longer segments fast with shorter, slower segments in between. Am I going to slog through a long run in the dead of winter or the death of summer. Or, could it be a burst of sustained energy run. And, what about Nadine.

In my running, I train. I train to be fast. I train to be fast in racing. I train to finish a race. I've trained for fast miles, two-mile races, 5km races, 10km races, 15km races, 10-mile races, trail races, mountainous races, half marathon races, and marathons. No training block has looked the other. Where is the fun in that?

So, I tweak. Breaking down training blocks into segments, each part of each segment broken down into smaller, more specific segments, each with time, speed, or endurance tied to them. I have a plan. I have a list. I have my health. Time to start my run that leads to the next run that leads to the next segment of the block that leads to the culmination of my tweaks. Just as there are no two snowflakes that look the same, neither have my running blocks matched one another. Tweaks lead to dead ends, leading to other tweaks, leading to breakthroughs.

A child runs for the joy of running. Run on the grass to the playground. Run to the next part of the playground. Chase a newly-found friend around the playground and over the grass until they both fall laughing and exhausted. For a moment. Run for as long as they can. Until they can't. Then, rest until they can run again. An adult at play is no different.

As a child, I ran. I run like a child now. Such a joy to swallow in the moment. Each running step leading to something to see. Each step run alongside fellow runners who have their own childlike attitude. We giggle. We tell stories. Without discussion, we pace one another, that pace accelerating throughout the run. Afterwards, whether at a meal, or coffee, or just at our cars, we share the moment. Stripped of pretense, abilities exposed, those are the when we share our dreams.

The child in my head gets me out the door. "Let's go see whether that lazy dog will bark at us again from its porch." "Maybe we'll see the new paint job on that house." "Can we wave at every runner, walker, cyclist, and dog that we see?" "Will there be deer and squirrels on the wooded trail?" "Come on!" "We gotta go!" "Oh! I'm tired. Can we stop for a minute?" "Look! A water fountain. Boy, am I thirsty." "Do you smell that? I want some of that!" I love my child.

My child loves to wander, discovering new running routes. My child never tires of the old routes, discovering new sights along the same paths. My child is never bored on a run. When there's movement, there's something happening. Until there isn't because it's time to rest. Rest is good when my child wants to rest. I'll leave the petulant moments out of this discussion.

Because of my companion, I know the feeling of running free, running fast, running long. We share the imagination that comes from running. We see nothing mundane on our runs. Every sight offers building a story around that sighting. "I think he's sneaking goodies to grandma's house. Look how carefully he's carrying that bag." "Wow! Did you see how fast she is cycling? She must be in a hurry to save someone, I would think." It just never ends.

Though just a spark, the child in me I bring along on my runs gives me just enough to find at least a moment, albeit brief, that makes a run memorable. This morning was no different: screaming "faster! faster!" I carried the morning and the child happily enjoyed the ride along.

I also run in reality. Just as I cherished the effort, I realized that I would still have another eight miles to run in my marathon just weeks away. 18 miles in three hours is nowhere close to the marathon finishing times I ran in my 20's, 30's, 50's and early 60's. I qualified for Boston in each of those decades. I'm not getting a BQ now, not with that effort. I'll be well over four hours in finishing. Not what I planned.

Standing in the parking lot, drying out, gulping water, feeling the post-run satisfaction, the thought came to both me and the child within. I'm running my last marathon. Racing a marathon close to two hours is using rarefied air. Running a marathon in under three hours is a challenge. Finishing a marathon under four hours' running time is exhausting. Any finishing time over that for me is heart wrenching.

But it doesn't have to be that way. This marathon will be one I've had on my bucket list since college. I've run marathons on islands, along ocean shores, in forests, along city streets, and in quiet suburbs. I've raced some courses more than once, because of the quality of the race or the limits of my budget, always with the goal of improving my personal best. Perhaps not this time.

This marathon should be the last one for me. There will not be throngs of fans lining the 26.2-mile course along a river covered in fall foliage. No video will be preserved for historical purposes, showing that I participated in this marathon as the end of a chapter in my life, the video showing just how slow my current race pace looks on screen. This marathon will be running with just a couple of thousand of my newest running friends, all of whom I will not see again. We'll run along the rural roads between towns, quietly encouraging one another, knowing that thousands more will have run and finished the half marathon associated with our race.

My running companions will be running the half marathon. They'll have the time to recover, shower, dine, and get to the finish line to cheer my finishing. Then, we'll find a brewpub, raise a glass, reveling in the shared experience. There will be no pronouncement regarding my marathoning ending. Any such statement is so unnecessary.

But, today's run was so much fun, bringing so much joy. I have that in my quiver. I will pull that out when needed, reminding me that I can run three hours or more, with the child within my approving my effort. Besides, there are other shorter races for which I can tweak the training.