

## Grooves

“Why do we run this route, again?” I asked aloud, my question directed to him. I looked into his expressionless face, except for the ever-present squinting eyes for a sun that wasn’t there. “Because you wanted to run with me, remember?” We continued onwards on the running path.

That was true. Years ago, on a weekend group run on a different route in a different part of the city, I’d mentioned that I missed running with others on a weekday, either before or after work. In response, he had casually mentioned that every Thursday morning before work he ran the loop we were running this morning. Having just taken a job offer that gave me some flexibility in my workday, I asked him whether I could join him. “I’d like to see what that route is like, if you’ll allow me to join you.” That was the first time I noticed his seemingly long musing before making a reply, as though he were contemplating all the angles to how to properly butter a slice of toast. “I would enjoy your running company,” was his reply.

“I know that,” was my retort. “Why do we run This Route every week?” I didn’t mind the route. It had variety. We ran six, seven, or eight miles on a tree-lined path along a small stream. We ran through different neighborhoods, each with their own matched style of homes. We included on our route the long uphill encased under a canopy of leafed trees, always coming back down through the oversized apartment complex adjoining the uphill. We never ventured from this route.

The running pace on any given Thursday was always based partially on the weather. In the dead of winter, it was a slog to get started and done in sub-freezing temperatures. In the height of summer, it was a slog to keep going in the oppressive heat, humidity, and high dew point. Those were “check the box” runs. In the spring, if no torrential rain had preceded the run, we would silently enjoy that feeling of warmth. In the fall, if no heavy rain covered the path, we would bask in the seemingly fast, each pace, a welcome change from the summer beatdown.

Some runs, he would make the statement just at his own pace, that the run was going to be relaxed. On other occasions, he would quietly and steadily increase the pace throughout the run, until we were pushing race pace in the last three kilometers through the final section along the stream. I never knew what pace we’d run on any given meet up. Well, that’s not quite true.

Over the years in my running Thursday mornings with him, I'd never known him to be angry or sullen to run angry. He was a stoic guy, glib in spurts, rarely into storytelling, willing to let conversation die a quiet death. But one morning, seemingly out to nowhere, he not only had thoughts to share aloud, but he also shared those while running us ragged on the edge of our abilities.

"We had an argument last night," he started. I assumed the we was he and his wife. I was correct. "I want to change employment and she wants to maintain our lifestyle," he continued. "She's afraid my new employment will interfere with what we've achieved." Noticing the pacing quickening slightly into the uphill, I slipped to running just off his right shoulder. "I'm exhausted from what I do. I don't want to keep working in a field that doesn't make me happy as a worker. There has to be more."

He was quiet up the hill, not because he was tired from the faster pace, but because he was thinking. As for me, I could feel the effort in my legs. I could also sense his verbal dam was about to break. Cresting the uphill, turning into the apartment complex with its myriad cars exiting for school drop off and eventual work destinations, he further quickened our pace.

"Life is a series of changes," he said. "It's how we adapt or die to those changes. I'm not ready to settle into thinking about what could have been. I want to know what could be, see where that path takes us." Too busy concentrating on just keeping up, I stayed silent. This was not my TED talk. "I taught myself the discipline to achieve. High school, college, grad school, all of it. I knew what I wanted and I thought I knew how to get there." He wasn't wrong. He has to be one of the most disciplined people I know.

"I just want something different in my career," he mused, almost talking to himself. "An opportunity has presented itself that I cannot resist. The money is good enough, but the work satisfaction and enjoyment has even better potential. She's upset because she thought I was informing her that my career change is final. It's not. I wanted her opinion. The opinions she gave did not answer the question I raised." He paused, before saying, "so we argued." And then, he was stoic, thoughtful for the remainder of the run. He kept up the running pace, causing a deep drop into the pain cave for both of us. I eventually learned that with his wife's encouragement, he'd changed careers. I always joked that he was now a hitman for the mob. He never denied it.

Following that run, we continued our Thursday running meetings to run the same route, while I chirped along the way and he mumbled. Sometime along the way, I began pondering why we run this same route weekly. That led to my noticing that the pace from one week to the next was different than the any other week. Why were we varying our paces? We rarely held the same pace throughout an entire running of our route. Some runs we easy by weather or design. Others were completely mojo' d, the pedal pushed to maximum. More often than not, there would be an unannounced acceleration at a different section of the route, without rhyme or reason. I'd just follow along.

“How come we're running fast in this neighborhood?” I once asked. The moment we had turned into the smallest of the neighborhoods, passing over the man cover in the middle of the street, just past the entrance, he accelerated without warning. I asked my question after earning the right by catching up to his pace. “We'd lost our concentration,” was all he said.

Another week, another Thursday run on the route, he exploded his pace, and mine, from the start, holding it past the high school to the base of the uphill. “What was that?!” I exclaimed. “ We needed to wake up,” was his response. Some runs, he'd see a deer or an aquatic bird or a dog being walked or a squirrel flying to and up a tree, and we'd be into another quickened pace for an undisclosed length of time. Every time, I would ask the question why. The answer was always obtuse. We were both consistent.

I collected these runs in my running logs. In each instance, the comments for the run would include the section where we accelerated. It could have been down the mile-long straight section of the path from the footbridge to the school. It could have up the mile-long straight section. It could have been the meandering part of the route through the big neighborhood, run to avoid the garbage collection, which is always on Thursday. Could have been from the trailhead into the wooded section. That was my favorite for the simple reason I enjoyed looking for the egrets and herons in the stream. They were always relocating, too.

“Do you wake up, having planned the ruin of my simple run?” I jokingly asked. Turning his gaze away from the path, looking straight at me, he replied. “You don't like tempo runs. You don't like long repeats. You don't like continuous fartlek.” He summed me

up fairly well. “But you do like to run fast, so we run fast for a bit.” He made it sound so simple.

With that answer, waves of comprehension washed over me. We never ran a predetermined pace for any of our runs over the last decade, but we did run an overall pace for the route that was pert near our tempo pace. We never ran set repeat distances, but we did run several of those each time. And every so often, I noticed the power of our running was engaged well within the first mile, extending over the remaining miles of the route to the trailhead finish.

On those power runs, we’d exchange leading, one gently edging in front of the other, giving way to the next exchange, always running smoothly a step behind or a step ahead of other. One of us leading along the stream’s path past the heron, the other taking the lead over the footbridge and onto the path connecting to the high school. Positions exchanging at the base of the uphill and then being turned over on the decline through the apartments. Both of us accelerating, running shoulder to shoulder through the adjoining neighborhoods, waving to the sanitation engineers whooping and hollering as we pass. Cruising out of the neighborhoods and onto the main path, we pass the high school, up the mile-long section of path, finishing almost together at the trailhead. My hands on my knees, breaths coming in truncated waves, I catch a glimpse of him. He has just a hint of a grin.

“I’ll be damned,” looking at him now. “You’re training us.” Again, glancing over, catching my surprise. “Nothing ever gets past you,” he said, chuckling. “Only took you years to grasp the concept.” And that was that.

We finished the run, saying the usual salutations, both of us heading towards our respective days. Today’s run was not a power run. It wasn’t a lazy run. It was the loudest run we’ve had since he became a mobster if that is what he does now. I picture bodies buried in his backyard. It was a nice weekday morning eight-mile run complete with running company, water, views, small animals, quiet sounds, and another day’s run checked off the daily list, all part of the pattern to living my life. And apparently, also to his. Wonder what happens on the run next Thursday.

And maybe he’ll tell me what he really does for a living, after all this time. Doubt it.