

Heat Wave

It was hot that day.
107 degrees in the shade hot.
No wind hot.
No clouds hot.
Dry hot.
Real hot.

And, we played a doubleheader. From my centerfield position, I could see across the road the soft, blue-colored criminal institution for the convicted insane. I could also see heat radiating off the pavement just 40 yards to the other side of the ballfield fence. The grass, both outside the ballpark and inside, felt hot under my spikes and looked wilted from the effort in staying green. Looking into the stands just behind home plate I could see the few fans that were in attendance sitting uncomfortably in the shade, seemingly wilting.

The opening game started at noon, finishing by two p.m. Good pitching and timely fielding kept the score low and the game quick. The heat? It kept rising. Heat rises later in the day, but in the valley, heat traps itself, waiting for sunset to begin the long, languid drill down to cooler. Not cool, just less. This time of summer, that meant overnight at just under 100 degrees.

After winning the opening game of the doubleheader, I began to notice that not only were the fans sitting in the shade showing the same distress as the closely-mowed grass, but the players on both teams were also slower in movement. The water fountains in both dugouts were in constant use. The water had an iron-like flavor but it was clear, not cold, but wet enough. The sun's vantage point in watching over our second game emanated more of a shearing glare than pleasant sunlight. Fielding a fly ball in that sunlight required art more than skill, more luck than practice. That's to what the closing end of the doubleheader came down in its finish.

My second time up to bat in the second game, I realized that if I could get on base, I had more energy than the players in the field playing for the other team. Hell, I had more bounce and stride than my own teammates. Thinking this was about to become another low-scoring game, I had a plan. I got on base. I stole second on the second

pitch to the next batter. I stole third on the third pitch to the batter after that. Two outs and I'm alone and on base. "What the hell," I thought.

I caught the batter's attention after he was 2-1 in balls and strikes, ahead in the count. I stole home on the fourth pitch, surprising the pitcher, who threw his speed ball into the dirt just in front of home plate, the ball hitting the outside black edge of the plate itself. Ball bounding away from the plate, my batting teammate bailing away from that same plate, the pitcher yelling to his catcher while sprinting towards the plate, I slid onto the right side of home plate, just as the now-arriving pitcher caught his catcher's throw, the tag flailing in the dry air while I popped up from the slide and walked towards our dugout. Safe and the only run for that game.

In the other team's last time up, that team's best hitter caught a fastball full on the screws, in the sweet spot of the barrel of his bat. It was going to dead centerfield. It was rising to dead centerfield in a hurry. It was going to dead centerfield in a hurry and deep. To the wall in dead centerfield deep. Like Willie Mays, I flicked off my ball cap, averting my eyes from the glare that was the hot sun, saw a spot where I thought the speeding ball would land, and sprinted.

Nope, I didn't have sunglasses. I had instinct from playing my position. Just as the worn down few in the stands and the exhausted players in the dugout and on the field thought the batted ball would outdistance me, I shot a sideways glance over my left shoulder, and seeing a black speck, reached out with my gloved hand, felt the ball's impact into my glove, gently squeezed the ball to be still. Coming to a stop, I turned to jog back to the infield, retrieving my cap along the route, held my glove against my chest. We could now get out of this hot, dry, egg fried on the sidewalk day.

49 years later, I am about to race my last competitive marathon. The summer has been hot, humid, oppressive, without any breeze or cloud cover. That's just in the mornings. Call the reason what you will, running in those conditions, morning after morning for over three months, whether on the roads, on shaded running paths, on the track, or in neighborhoods, was unpleasant, at best. Never sufficient water and always craving more, I and the group with whom I run, suffered together. The post-run breakfast couldn't come soon enough.

This summer has been the 17th consecutive summer running and training in the oppressive heat and humidity. A place wherein the dew point never falls below 70. I

perspire when I arise in the early morning. I sweat when I begin the run. I am drenched when I finish. You just deal. I deal with it all because I know that come sometime after Labor Day, the dryer, lighter air will come. I know this because the baked-in heat of August, spurred on from June and July's heated efforts, will feel runnable, even with the oppressiveness of summer.

And then, comes that first September morning run, when the air is crisper, the temperature cooler, accompanied by a gentle breeze. Running attire now has a purpose other than being a necessity to cover up. But it's that unannounced spring in my running step that changes everything. I fittingly bounce along my route, energy in my stride, pacing now a thing. I am no longer surviving to get through my training run. This day's effort brings renewed energy in running towards my goal.

My first year in grad school, before the internet, before the general use of cellphones, I would once each month purchase a running magazine from the local running store. On this one memorable occasion, in turning the pages, I found myself reading about a marathon that was raced in Southern New York. Corning, N.Y., actually. Now named the Wineglass Marathon. Reading that it ran in the Fall, through the Southern Finger Lakes (whatever those were), starting in a town named Bath, then through Savona, Campbell, through Painted Post, finishing in Corning, all the while alongside a river named Cohocton, and leaves of color, I was hooked.

Five decades later, I shuffled through another hot, drenching summer of running, having given myself a reason. Living on the West Coast, I'd never had the money to travel to the other side of the country. I do now. Of course, I'm a bit closer now. Older, too. I envision running in crisp air, a gentle sun, feeling the fall morning warm as the morning moves towards noon, the sounds of spectators cheering, the moving sounds of the river, the leaves changing color.

Running is in me. As a toddler, I ran down the hall and through the living room. As a child, I ran through the park. Throughout my school years, I ran in all the sports I played. In college to now, I traded running in baseball spikes for running on trails, paths, and roads in the new shoes designed for runners. Marathoning followed because I fell for the Boston Marathon and the discipline required in training. Running will remain with me after this, my 66th or so marathon, I think.

This morning, with the weather cool, the air dry, the dew point in the low 50's, the sky a pleasant hue of blue, and a fall-like breeze wafting about me, the run was smooth, effortless. Three hours was the goal. I envisioned a well-intentioned slog while searching for shade. Three hours later, I had exceeded my expectations.

After a slow, wake up, first mile – at my age now, the first mile is always a slow wake up – I tentatively picked up my pace. I play a game on my long runs wherein at every mile split I mentally calculate my overall per mile pace. In the summer, I hold pace, never slowing, and begrudgingly slicing small time bits from the pace. Today was different.

I clicked the first hour's miles at a rate that brought time mile pace down by 45 second per mile. The legs were light, the turnover easy, the breathing smooth, the running was effortless. In the second hour, the pace dropped with each passing mile, with my reaching each mile as if I were clicking off passing cars. In the final hour's running, the miles were now two to almost three minutes faster than in the first hour's running.

It was a run for the aged. I am that aged runner. I loved it. Running solo, pushing myself because this summer's training and the weather for this run came together, I ran as if I were a child laughing from the effort. Continually waiting for the final miles to be slow, that expectation never came to fruition. Running marathon pace in the final hour of a three-hour training run, alone, is a joyful moment. Yes, it's a moment. But it's a moment you put into the box of treasures, to be looked at and admired on a future rainy day, or, a distant oppressively-hot summer's day.

I sense that today's run, while not my last multi-hour run, is my last marathon training run. I ran it with the glorious feeling of accomplishment. I never wavered in my commitment to effort, rewarded with the self-satisfaction in knowing I accomplished what I thought I could achieve. It was sweet.

Until this morning's three-hour run, Wineglass was to be my farewell to marathoning. Truthfully, it remains to be my farewell. I've raced marathons in cities, small towns, amongst forests, alone and in massive crowds. I've raced Boston seven times, having qualified more times than that. Time to run towards other things.