

Purposeful

At one time the football stadium on the Stanford University campus had both a track and a seating capacity of almost 90,000. Opened 103 years ago in 1921 with a 66-row, U-Shaped structure second only to the Yale Bowl in size at the time. On the field was both a football and track and field stadium. It was an earthen horseshoe with wooden bleacher seating and flooring set upon a steel frame. Its original seating capacity was 60,000, which grew to 89,000 by 1927 as a nearly enclosed bowl when 14 rows of seating were added. Walking from the bottom to the top of the stadium at one time, the stadium became steeper until the top was reached.

At one time a three-old boy accompanied his father to a football game played in that stadium. The boy sat next to his father 30 rows up from the track and the field on the press box side of the stadium, above the 30 yard line marked on the field. The boy was more impressed by the stadium's immensity than he was with the game being played on the field. Quietly, he ate his hot dog and fries, drank his soda, all the while staring to his left at the end zone.

At halftime of that game the three-year old, some day to avidly play baseball through high school, football in college, become a Marine, marry well, earn a college degree, raise three children, work his way up the business structure through the merit of his own energy and drive, decided he was going to walk himself up the end zone steps of that stadium, his father in tow. The boy led his father along the lowest walkway next to the track, over to the longest length of steps up from the middle of the closed in portion of the stadium.

80 rows to the top, approximately 150 steps, with short three-year old legs, no word to his father about his intent, the boy turned into the step, beginning his climb. Just a few steps into the climb, the father realized his son's goal. Up they went at a surprisingly steady pace, not too quick and with just enough momentum to arrive at the next step up. The father smiled and nodded to each of the seated spectators who saw what the boy was doing. The boy said not a word, looking down with the intensity required for his task.

There is a view from the very top of the stadium overlooking the various eucalyptus groves, the flat ground upon which the University is located, and the roads and trails throughout the campus. It is a glorious view, especially from the top of the stadium.

The boy reached the top, earning his view. His father lifted the boy up so that the boy could both experience the view and place his hands on the stadium's rim. The boy giggled, asked to be put back on the steps, holding his father's hand as the two of them slowly made their way down the way they came.

Over three decades later, the father is very much aware that every day brings a new event, most of those daily moments are small, innocuous. Some are almost mindless because they are so well practiced. Arising from sleep, showering, breakfasting, driving to work. Other events require forethought, include the work day with tasks that must be accomplished to reach another task in a long process of tasks for a project. But each must be completed in their turn. Still others require the desire to stretch one's imagination, that imagination being determined by one's own inner-strength to achieve those desires.

Yesterday being a Saturday, I awakened at 4:30 a.m., otherwise known as o'dark thirty. In that pre-dawn darkness, I found my slippers, worn only in cold weather because my toes don't enjoy the sensation of the cold floor that feels so nice in summertime. In the kitchen I found coffee that I heated in the microwave. Cup in hand, I headed to the seven-step walk up to the bonus room/home office wherein my running clothes were kept in a corner dresser.

In the heat, humidity, and dew point of summer, arising at o'dark thirty with an already risen sun makes sense from a runner's self-preservation perspective. In late fall through early spring, being up that early for a run makes no sense at all. Unless I want the company of other runners, either for the run or for the post-run brunch. My desire to run in companionship outweighs my dread of the darkness. This morning is the variation of that theme. I'll be running solo before breaking bread and lattes. The rest of my tribe are out of town or running a route not suited to my running.

Having slowly consumed the coffee, put on the required layers for the run in the freezing temperature, the necessary after-run clothing, and the various accoutrements, I hefted the running bag, grabbed the drying towel for the car seat, heading out through our neighborhood to the freeway, always hopeful I will arrive at my destination in one piece, this morning's location being the regional park along the river, with its eight-mile long running path. I have the sense of a goal, not knowing if I can achieve that this morning.

In my car, driving the 30 minutes to the park, alone with my thoughts and Kasey Kasem's American Top 40 from the 70's, commencing the daily requiem for a run yet to be performed, the thoughts rumble through my brain. The plan is 10 miles. The details are two miles of warm up, literally and figuratively, progressing from a slog to a jaunt to a rhythmic stride. More than any other basis for the warm up, I need to ensure I have properly addressed the clothing layers needed for the run, including head and finger coverings. The plan for the final eight miles, the meat of the run, is to keep each mile below a set per mile pace. That pace has my attention.

When I was a younger runner, this run would not include a warm up leading into the final eight miles. It would include a stronger opening leading to an even stronger progression, the full run being completed in an hour or less. In middle age, there would be a conversational short in length warm up before the remainder of the run was accomplished, the entire run taking just 10-15 minutes over an hour. A decade ago, under an hour and a half was the goal, which I achieved regularly. Those were times when I ran in the company of runners of my ability, leading to a shared joy in pushing one another to being better. Then, I slowed more than the others, starting at the same time only to be a minute or more a mile behind them throughout the running course we chose. Despondency was just one result.

This morning, I wrestled with whether I could be content with completing the task I'd given myself in under an hour and forty minutes. The alternative was accepting the usual result of being somewhere in time just south of two hours and well north of 10-minute pace. A run is a run, regardless of how the run is run. However, some runs mean more than others. My running history includes a nose to the grindstone attitude and a cherished, honest effort at self-greatness on the weekend run, be that moment from the three-hour run or a shorter but still long run with a fast-paced effort. It was the latter I sought this morning.

This purposeful effort requires a mindset aimed at success. How that success is defined determines the success of the moment. Starting this run at just after 6 in the morning in the cold of a late November weekend is success unto itself. That I'm willing to wrestle with my eroding running form while increasing and maintaining a faster pace is another successful moment. The next steps taken are the icing on the well-baked warm and soft cake. Running is simple in form and intent: run to there from here as fast and consistently as possible. Keeping simple the effort in improving running ability is a complex task. Or not.

I parked in the main lot next to the trailhead. Other cars began parking in the same large lot, lean runners emerging, gathering, for their own morning's adventure. It was time to execute the plan. I left my car, beginning the breathtaking warm up into the still coldness, pausing after the first quarter mile for a short walk, doing the same after the next half mile followed by the next three-quarter mile, leading into the final portion of the warm up back to the car. Changing gloves for more warmth and my hat for a ski cap, I was off into the wilderness of the running path.

Running on the undulating path along the river, I saw no one to the one-mile mark, just the ever-flowing river. The expensive GPS watch vibrated my having run the first mile under 10-minute pace.

In the second mile that bends slightly away from the river, I saw deer move off the path into the woods away from the river, my voice quietly repeating "mindset" as I found my rhythm. A few seconds quicker than the first mile.

The third mile took me away over the footbridge to a silent confrontation with a 9-point buck over who would proceed first. After the buck was convinced I was not an important player, leaving me to my running, this mile being a few seconds quicker than the second mile.

In the fourth mile, alongside a sizeable pond before heading into the deeper woods, with the blue heron sidling along the far bank, I completed this mile a few seconds quicker than the third mile.

Following in the fifth mile, the last water stop before the fountain is turned off because of freezing weather, deer moved silently off the path, because larger packs of runners were a disturbance. This mile was a few seconds quicker than the fourth mile.

The sixth mile was a repeat of mile three, the buck replaced by mindless walkers who didn't understand sharing the path. The sun was well above the tree line and I could feel a hint of warmth. I was all in at this point, running a few seconds quicker than the fifth mile.

Passing over the footbridge, running along the path in a reverse repeat of the second mile, repeating "mindset" silently to myself, I dug into the pace, running a few seconds quicker than the sixth mile.

No longer repeating "mindset" to myself in the final mile which repeats the opening one, the path was filled with both running packs and walkers with dogs. The watch vibrating a mile split a few seconds quicker than the seventh mile, I allowed myself a smile and a fist pump.

Mindset, indeed.