

Throwing Down the Gauntlet

Oh! Look! It's November! Again.

Time for the raking of leaves. Raking leaves for a long time, especially when the lawn guy, who gets paid, fails to show up for two weeks to scoop up the fallen angels of summer, much less mow. Raking leaves in the side yard on a Friday afternoon, with fresh arms and legs isn't too awful. Continuing the raking of the leaves in the front yard the next afternoon, following the weekend long run, with now tired arms and legs is touching awful. Finishing the three-day endeavor Sunday amidst a light rain, pulling with exhausted arms and legs is beyond awful. But I'm not bitter, much.

Time to move the summer running wear from the home office dresser in the corner in the dark, with various mementos and photos on its top, take the summer wear to the guest bedroom dresser, pulling out the winter running wear before placing the summer wear into the dresser, carrying the winter running wear back to the home office, and placing the winter running wear into their usual vrbo for the cold duration, checking for any foul aroma requiring laundered attention. The simple touch of the thicker running shirts, base layers, half-tights, ski socks, and running pants, makes me feel cold, just not as cold as I will feel running outside come January and February. Not that I'm planning on more bitterness. That's a lie.

Time to adjust to the cool November winds that will turn cold before Thanksgiving. Those strong breezes, still semi-warm when I'm in the sun and tending towards uncomfortable when I'm in the shade. Makes for an interesting time on a run, which I begin slightly underdressed, hoping for the warmer side of the wind. That works for the first half of November, not so much by month's end. And, when that first blowing wind from the north descends upon us, I begin my annual cursing of the pre-winter wind. That string of epitaphs grows longer as the winter months progress. I'm not bitter, much.

Time for renewed dark living. Waking up in the dark, driving in the dark, coming home in the dark, and if I don't plan correctly, finishing a run in the dark along an unlit bike path or road. Less than ideal. But it's November, with the promise of crisp mid-fall days among fallen leaves with the ever-present wafting aroma of warmth coming from kitchens I pass on my runs. The smell of baked pies, turkey, yams, mixed with the faint whiff of coffee. Bitterness isn't even a thought at those moments.

On Thursday, with the intention of a fast tempo-style run, I ran along one of my favorite routes, starting at a local library parking lot, heading onto an asphalt-covered path snug against a small stream, connecting to another asphalt path in the regional park, into an upscale neighborhood, back into the park, finishing along the river trail.

Following two days of easy running, I had the mental temperament to run faster than my usual pace and I wanted to show off to myself. Because getting to the library takes over 30 minutes of driving with no traffic, I don't always run that way. Weekend runs in the early morning are one thing, weekday traffic is another. Finding myself with time, I put together my running bag and drove.

This library is massive in size and its parking lot is even larger, much like the parking lot you'd find for a small stadium. Touched on one side by a neighborhood of upscale and mostly single-story oversized homes, by an elementary school just through the woods on another side, with single-track asphalt paths around it, the library has ample parking room for library patrons and those that want to park on the library side of the thoroughfare separating it from the river trail. I was just one of only a few cars parked throughout this oversized lot.

Of the age where running faster than usual requires warming up the lungs, I sauntered a mile around the outer loop connecting to the wood-encircled oval loop before returning for a reverse of the outer loop surrounding a mowed grass field upon which I've never stepped foot. Crossing the road over to the river trail, looking both ways, pondering the probable success of my planned run, I ran the trail's much smaller parking lot to the beginning of the trail and my run.

The small stream has a small bridge connecting the parking lot to the trail, the trail taking an immediate sharp right before beginning its mile-long meandering aside the stream. Shaded on both sides, homes with large lots on one side, the stream babbling along on the other, the success of this day's run depended on how close I ran that first mile to my own projection. The sun was out, no clouds as it's companion, just a hint of a breeze, the mid-November warmth present, and the path was depleted of others. On each side of the path are manicured posts every one-tenth of a mile. I only check at what is the half-mile marker and the mile mark.

I checked my elapsed time at both posts. This was going to be a good run. I carried forth into the toughest mile on the loop, a steady, consent incline into the regional park, around the obligatory tennis courts not yet turned into pickleball pits,

whereupon the uphill begins in earnest just at the upper soccer fields, turning left off of the park path onto the private greenway traversing the neighborhood. A long steady upward trajectory along the treelined path between elegant two-story homes, until the sharp right adjacent to a highway descending sharply down, to quickly down, to a gently-declining wooded path with a tiny stream taking me back towards the park. I rarely run that incline mile in a decent time. I just don't. No excuses. Today was different.

My second mile split was almost as quick as my first mile. That is rare for me. So rare that I quickly realized that this run was different from most of my prior efforts on this loop. The feeling is not that I am fast, it's more that I feel fast. When I feel fast, I run faster. When I run faster, the incentive to keep pushing the pace is greater. And, when that incentive is greater, I have a great run. Like on this run, wherein the last two miles were, shall we say, quick. I mean in times I've not run in almost a year. Gleeful in finishing, I wondered what I could do come Saturday's longer run with the running kids. Could be sweet.

Turned out that run was sweet. 10 miles with the running kids starting and finishing from the same library. The two runs being tied together in the same week occasionally happens. Not relevant. The bright, shiny object for this weekend run was that I was able to see the running kids for most of the run. This is a big deal because the usual result is that I see them for the first mile as I inexorably slow behind them to the point of no return. I no longer see them, much less run with them. They never say anything about the severing of the running tie that binds us, but it's the usual.

This run wasn't in that category. The per mile pace I kept, which was a continuation from Thursday's run, allowed me to keep an eye on them until the last couple of miles. That pace was also the fastest overall pace for that run that I've accomplished for the entire year. It's been a tough year. The usual weekend result is my finishing just as they are heading to the required post-run brunch. This time, I finished while they were still coming down from their runs. Finishing just over a half-mile after them was quietly rewarding for me. Which made me think.

Having just suffered through five weeks of a severe cold with constant coughing, my lungs felt clear, my breathing no longer felt heavy when running. I also noticed more pep in my day, whether running or not. These two runs demonstrated to me that

whatever lingered inside me was gone, or almost. My itty bitty corpuscles were not loaded down with crud. While I am not a doctor, and I have stayed at a holiday inn express, I just knew I felt better.

How much better is what I asked myself. Better equals daydreaming, again. Daydreaming not only about running, but what kind of running. Simple daydreams, such as, can I slowly, steadily drop my training pace on the solid running days. The easy running days will remain easy for the duration. And, the beatings will stop when morale improves. But I digress. I pondered what my long repeats could look like. Or, my quick runs on my favorite courses. The fact that I am considering improvement in my running is a huge step forward for me.

Now I want to slowly push open the envelope. Can I improve to seeing the running kids throughout the Saturday morning runs. Could I run paces I've not achieved in the last two years? Maybe racing will be fun again. That has been in my rearview mirror for quite a while. These are little things in the scheme of my life. They are my little things.

Driving to the post-run brunch, I found myself excited just in pouring over the concept. Been a long time coming. I completely enjoy the feeling inside me when I run fast. My running may not look fast to anyone else, but it feels fast to me. that feeling is what got me into running 46 years ago and is a part of why I still run. To have a little bit of that part come back, even if briefly, would be sweet indeed.

So just having ordered my meal and while sipping hot coffee, imagine my surprise and chagrin upon receiving and reading a text from my wife. She has Covid. Doesn't matter how careful we've been or will be. She has Covid. She and I will make certain her virus doesn't harm her, either now or later. But, she has Covid. That means I may have Covid. And, if I do have Covid, that will delay my daydreaming for a bit. I quickly had my food to go, explained my predicament to the running kids, and bailed for home.

November can be bitter.