

## Age Grade This

Today was a first for me. Sort of. I raced in a 5-mile Thanksgiving Day run in a local suburb, run on long hills along two major thoroughfares, and out and back shaped in an “L” and a smaller “l” tacked on in the last mile. The weather was cold, so no one stood around chatting after the finish for very long. Well, that, and there were house chores to be completed on this annual feast day.

In the opening mile, it became clear that the morning would be dominated by high-school aged runners, some intent on barely touching the asphalt in their pursuit of teen excellence. Others chitchatted happily with friends oblivious to the easy pace they were running. Some ran alongside a parent just ahead of the pedestrian participants. Not until the final mile did silence prevail.

The top finishers showed a mix of collegiate-aged competitors, a smattering of early 30-somethings, grizzled and determined masters, and the prep runners. Only because of the first turnaround did I see any of them racing. I saw the leader followed by a couple more runners who were followed by small gangs of runners who were followed by the almost as fast larger groupings. None of those first one hundred included me. Running to the second turnaround, I missed seeing any of the first quarter of the finishers and barely glimpsed the quarter of the field following the leaders. I was with the younger but not as fast as the faster runners. I raced to my ability, ultimately finishing just into the upper half of the finishers.

Sixteen years ago, when I last ran this race, I finished in just over 7:00 per mile pace. That was also a freezing morning. I’m now 65. Slower. Much slower. My result from that last race placed me seventh in my age division and 60th overall. The result from this year interested was just a bit different. Okay, the result was a whole lot of different. This year, I won my aged division. And I was the only registered participant in my age division. No one else, just me. There were 10 women aged 60 to 69 who each finished. Four men in their younger 60’s raced. That image made me feel just a bit lonely, which I found humorous, given that I was surrounded by other runners throughout the race.

I became curious as to whether that was a one-off result. Finding research papers on the Google, I determined that my being the solo 65-69 aged runner was not surprising because just over six-percent of runners are in their sixties and less than

two-percent are in their 70's. We're a small band of brothers and sisters. Runners under 20, in their 20's, their 30's, and 40's, each make up 80-percent of all runners. Runners in their 50's are 13-percent of runners. Then there are the soon-to-be-retired Medicare and Social Security wannabes, like me.

The truth is that we don't want to be retired necessarily because we still have vitality inside us. We also don't want to use Medicare, but it is a necessity, given the ailments we bring with us into this age. While we pay into Social Security for decades, taking it means more about who we have become than the amount we receive. With my meandering into the second half of my sixties, those thoughts are a lot for me to unpack.

I think I speak for the congregation in offering that we're not appreciative of the physical decline preceding the eventual mental falling off the cliff. This year, a first in my life, I have wrestled with the thought that I am no longer a boon to society, only a burden. That burden will only increase until there is a crescendo of collective failure to prop me up any longer. Call it what you will. I'm focused on the here and now of this moment. I smirk over the collective thought that retirement years are the golden years. That is a fallacy made up for the sole purpose of allowing us to be comfortable with no longer being necessary.

Look at a toddler teaching herself to walk, or a child learning to ride a bicycle. See the student learning through reading when alone, the expression of an artist crafting their skill. Those are intense, silent moments unique in desire, shared by all. Life is not hard. Living life is the challenge. That I arise every Sunday morning to write this piece that is part of a larger collective is my answer to living. Others awaken, focused on their answer to living. This daily effort is not a grind. It is a means to not only move through our day but to expand ourselves. So how do I manage myself now that I am closing in on retirement and the baggage that comes with that.

I don't enjoy fulfilling the requirements placed upon me by my age, the monitoring of the effectiveness of the medicines I take in pill form through the constancy of the medical appointments. I am not a fan of performing – solo – physical therapy to regain my balance, walking ability, running gait, shoulder tendonitis, and general wellbeing. As I said, living is hard work. Living to the best of my ability and attempting to expand that ability requires more diligence than I knew when I was younger.

That I was the only finisher in my age group with the time I ran fits with my current running life. I am behind the others in my running group and that group has dwindled from being an ameba of various runners numbering over 20 to just a few. I can count just the fingers on my good hand our current numbers. Unlike when I was a member of a pack in high school, college, post-collegiately, and throughout my career, I now run mostly solo. That fact doesn't distract me. Being voted once in junior high school and again in high school as the person most likely to succeed on a deserted island, I can do solo. Based on to solitary requirements of my 40-plus years in my career, I have eased into the monk-like phase of running.

Running solo is another layer to succeeding in running. The truth is that I don't run alone. On every run, I am surrounded by those who have run with me through the years and those who would run with me now. They are each important to my runs. Without each of them, I could not tie my shoelaces, getting out the door to run yet another day. Some run beside me, matching my strides. Some run just in front of me, pulling me to a quicker pace. Others are just behind me, reminding me to keep the pace going. Of course, there are other voices in my head but we'll leave those out of this conversation. They're a jealous lot.

I'm a thinker. In my thoughts, I ponder a whole lot of somethings that mean nothing to others. When I think about running, I reflect on what I can run today that will both make the run fun and worthwhile for the runs to follow. I've reached the runner's age where I know what types of runs work for me, showing me the most of myself. I began as a runner at a time when every run was run hard, fast, to the bitter end. Anything less than all out was a failure. Most days I had failures. Then I noticed others running with me or in races had their own share of failing. I wasn't so bad.

On some days now, the runs are purposefully slow, so as to recover for other days when the runs are faster. A few of those other days, the runs are monumental, done with a goal of being stronger and faster. When I do those kinds of runs, I take along my memories' faster running friends, because I need the push and the pull through the workout. Those weekly focused runs are an extension of my desire to feel how fast I can run and for how long. I enjoy the feeling of running. Running doesn't hurt. Running is different from falling awkwardly. Running is a learned exercise (pun intended) in addressing fatigue building through the run, both taming it and practicing how to best use it in race.

I wonder how I'd feel in running a race of only age-grouped runners in their sixties. First off, it would be a small race in numbers. The tens of thousands of runners from forty years ago would now be a couple of hundred. Max. There would definitely be the genetically-gifted ones who would be gone from the starting horn, running at or under 6:00 pace per mile, no matter the distance. Most of us would fall somewhere behind them but never so alone as to running alone. I'd be in the middle of the pack, being pushed to be faster because I am racing others my age and of my ability.

At the race's conclusion, we'd talk of races long ago while drinking a beer, not so much reminiscing as commiserating. Having built a treasure trove of long runs, fast runs, silly runs, each with a moment's glory, none of us would have forgotten those runs. More importantly, each of us would lend our collective ear to hear those tales, feeling the wind in our hair, the rain pelt our clothing, the sun heating our feet, the labors that each of us willingly undertook. Not any different from old people sitting around the coffeehouse table or in today's version of a parlor, telling ourselves everything was so much better in so many ways than they are now.

That's a farce.

I want today to be better than my yesterday. That begins with me. I don't need an audience to encourage me to awaken each morning with a semblance of a plan. No need to remind me to make my bed, brush out the ickies in my teeth, find that cup of yesterday's coffee, and dress for a morning run. That's no different now than over forty years ago when I first started running. From there, my day is my oyster. So much to read, so much to see, so many thoughts to organize. And maybe someone of like mind willing to listen.

Ya know, I'd like to think that 60 and over race would be larger than I expect. There'd be fans watching along the course, well-trained in cheering on their spouse, parent, and now grandparent. I'd expect the postrace storytelling to be a whole lot different. Multi-generational stories are the best. You can't age grade that, now can you.