

Both Can be True

He was a career attorney, a partner in a high-powered law firm. He was buttoned down, soft-spoken, insightful, and very good in his profession. I'd watched his actions in the courtroom in which he excelled in conversations with the judge of the particular court of the day. I'd read his legal papers, his writing eloquently direct. His approach was impeccable and his demeanor undemanding. One day, following the day's law and motion calendar, he hastened to follow me out of the courthouse. I knew what was coming.

Excitedly, he began regaling me about his personal experience from his racing a distant half marathon just a few weeks before our conversation. Smugly, I dutifully listened, unimpressed, because he saw his race from the back. Over a decade older than myself, he was not a fast runner. I was, so why would I enjoy hearing his tale? I was an ass.

He knew I ran. He knew I was avid at my running. He knew I would appreciate the planning, the training, the travel, the dining, the race expo, the swirling colors of race kits of the others running the race, the twists and turns of his navigating the course, finding his racing groove, his finishing being another accomplishment in his amateur avocation. What he didn't know was that I didn't comprehend running at as slow a pace as he had achieved. I was an ass.

He had actually raced a course that I had on my to-do racing list, in a city which I'd not visited. His descriptions of the city, the views, the sights, the course, the city's residents, and his joy from his trip described my own hopes for my trip to that city and in running that race. Truthfully, I can now, over a decade later, recall his excited commentary. His recounting of his race trip resounded within me; except I knew I'd run so much faster. I still wish to take that same trip, although now, I'd run at a slower pace than him. I was such an ass.

I owe him a drink, a latte, and my undivided attention to listening as he offers other tales of his running life. His ardor and passion should not be dismissively ignored. His experiences should be cherished, and expression of thanks for sharing returned in equal passion. I owe him an apology. Should I ever see him again, I will do just that. But then, that apology would sound hollow to me and seem so shallow. I am such an ass.

The race was held in Spanaway. It was a half marathon, my first race that far in distance. It was over 40 years ago. I was still matriculating my way through post-high school education. Running was my outlet from being a wannabe couch potato. Racing was my fun. Those races were rarely over 10kilometers. This race was one of those rarities.

I don't recall how I learned of this half, but I was clearly sufficiently intrigued to have located a race application, sent in a check, determined the race location, and showed up. The morning alarm worked as did the car. The starting time of 9 a.m. was a great assist. I parked in what I recall to be a huge strip mall parking lot, the lot filling the closer to race start and almost full of runners' cars by start time. After that, the rest is a blur.

I knew only one way to race at that time and it was all out from the start gun. Apparently, there were others in this race that suffered from the same affliction in pushing the pedal to the metal in the first mile, hanging on for each of the 12 miles that followed. I was in a very large pack of runners, the pack turning into a long snakelike grouping, running down one street before turning first left onto another street and then turning again right onto yet another street, each of us taking turns leading or following.

But it was the hills I recall. I didn't race another half marathon for over another decade because of those hills. The course sampled several neighborhoods, each with distinct styles of house, and each with its own set of hills. Somehow, the race advertisement failed to mention those hills. Forget that with every steep, short uphill there is a flipside steep, short downhill. There were hills in each mile and each one brought more friends.

Cresting each uphill, my having suffered alongside the others in the large lead pack, I became angrier, muttering under my labored breathing, "Great! Another damned hill. This sucks." But I continued hanging onto the pack, twisting, turning, climbing, and descending. Foolishly, I suffered because that was my racing style. The only mile marker I remember is mile 12. I pushed harder if that was possible. Cajoling my legs to match my exhausted breathing, I churned and dug. Then, I finished. I held sub-6:00 per mile pace, despite the too numerous to count hills. I landed in the top ten of that lead pack, the youngest in age. Driving home, I vowed I wouldn't do that ever again. I was so ignorant.

I raced another half marathon this weekend. An overnight road trip with like-minded older runners, we were roadies looking for a great pre-race dinner, a nice VRBO, and good beer after the race. We managed to find each. The race itself was an utter disaster for me. That the air was cold and the sky presented a light, chilling rain were merely secondary to the challenges I had to overcome for 13.1 miles. I know how to dress for and run in cold, wet conditions. I fully anticipated a race effort worthy of my abilities and aspirations. I got the ability part right. I was slow.

From the first running step across the start mat and each step thereafter, I was slow. From that first step to the last of over 30,000 steps, my focus was to not fall, while simultaneously avoiding my left shoe from constantly striking my right ankle bone, my knees from knocking one another, and my calves from rubbing one another. That focus assured me that I would not be running fast. In one race, I undid over two years of concentrated effort through physical therapy to eradicate those issues. It was Deja 'vu all over again.

The course didn't help. Though we raced through numerous neighborhoods with many twists and turns, almost every turn led from one incline into another. By the 10km mat I was exhausted, though I didn't realize that fact at the time. Running back through downtown, we had more room to roam the course through the parks, the city buildings, and the stately homes along the wide thoroughfares. That is to say that the race thinned enough that the runners were well spaced, each of us seemingly running solo. That's how it is in the very back of the race pack.

Through the downtown section, I mentally placed each pair of my running shoes in a box for delivery to a charity for repurposing, packed my summer running attire into a different box for a different delivery, all my winter running clothing into yet another box for pickup by a local charity, and finally, all of my ribbons, medals, trophies, race photos, and running artwork into the trash. All because they are worn by a runner who cannot run and those items should go to others who can.

Well, there is one I was going to keep. It is of me and my wife arm in arm standing, beaming, on a deserted Newbury Street in Boston's Back Bay after the 1996 Boston Marathon. That was a good race day.

Focused on placing one foot ahead and not directly in front of the other, I pushed on through the downtown for the final 5km to the finish at the edge of the local

university. The after-race finish line video shows me crossing, stiff-legged, shoulders sagging, with an exhausted stride. I was done. Adding the cherry to the top of this disaster was I caught myself before I fell to the right while walking – walking – to the gear check.

Two years ago, at this same race on this same course, I fell into holly bushes because I could not keep my body from running laterally to the right. Yes, holly bushes hurt when you fall into them. Legs bloodied; I came away from that race knowing I had some physiological issues to address. And I thought I had done just that through the PT work since that time. It was a lie. Topping off that physical failure repeat, I am now slow, truly slow.

Just a couple of months before “the race where I fell” occurred, I had raced a half marathon at 8:00 per mile pace. That was a good race day. Walking like a staggering drunk from the finish line deep into the building to change and consume food and water with electrolytes, a glance at my running watch showed I’d just run two minutes slower per mile. There is no joy in Mudville when you suck.

My running friends gathered me up sometime later and we headed to the shuttle for the short ride to the start where we had parked so long ago in the early morning hours. The rain picked back up as we walked outside to reach the covered parking garage. Another part of the process was the desire for a hot, long shower. Lunch and a beer could wait. Changing into dry, warm clothing after my shower, I looked for a shirt. The race shirt is actually one I can wear, soft, comfy, and not ostentatious. So, I did. Consuming food didn’t have the appeal I thought until I drank a stout. A burger and a salad was my gift to myself. Well, and another stout.

One of us looked up race results: I was third in my old guy age division. Out of nine.

Turning 66 next month, I am now just a runner who races for the memories from the experience. Unfortunately, those experiences promise to be on the depressing side. Each race will be a trudge and a solitary race against finishing last. I refuse to go quietly into the running night. I still have my running shoes. The running clothes are in their stored places. The packing boxes remain.

I also have a list of people to whom I owe an apology. Their stories are better than mine.