

Drift

The race course for the K2 Vashon Island Strawberry Festival 10km race is what sold it for me. The event was worth arising early the weekend Saturday of the second week of July each year, driving from the U-District to West Seattle, catching a ferry that carried my automobile to Vashon Island, driving to the Tacoma side of the island for a 9 a.m. start. July is not a hot month in the Northwest, though it could have its moments. The usual mid-morning race start time for the Seattle area did not create a weather issue in the second weekend of July.

A 10km run along island roads, covered in long uphill sections accompanied by sloping downhill leading into another incline before another decline, repeat, rinse, carry on. One long loop starting at what seemed an arbitrary spot on the Island, the race course loop including neighborhoods, each home with a view of the Puget Sound and the surrounding land adjoining the Island. We'd run fast from the start through the ever-present evergreens of the Northwest down SW Cove Road, which would drop before directing us through a chicane downward turn, leading into a long winding uphill still on SW Cove Road. (I never did locate a street in the greater Seattle area that didn't start or end with a direction.)

Caught up in the speed of the opening two miles to the chicane, I'd forget to look out onto the sliver of the Sound to the land mass opposite me and the towns of Olalla and Fragaria. Well into the second mile, we entered a long semi-flat stretch, water on our left, the ever-present aroma from the evergreens permeating the air. Just as we'd start the first long climb I'd look to my left, see the blue water and the homes on the other side. Breathtaking in the small moment's glance, I would catalogue for a later time to thrill in the splendor of middle-class homes sheltered amongst the evergreens, both on the Island and on the land over the Sound, living in clear air, crisp in its nature, and cool on the tongue.

Man, that was a fast section, and each time I raced this course I caught myself from drifting away as we raced a blistering pace appropriate to our terrain. Flat and down, followed by slight ups and slighter downs, accompanied by flats, and all in the first half of the course. A sharp right turn away from the water at 3.5 miles into the race changed my viewpoint. The short moment on SW 148th Street (see what I mean?) led into a long, never ending grind continuing after a right turn onto 119th Ave SW, on which we raced seemingly forever up and up through wild grass covered openings

before a lefthand turn onto SW 156th Street for a stretch before turning right onto 115th Ave SW, running on what felt similar to as flat a section of road as there was on this course.

Somewhere down SW 160th Street, on our left, hidden from our view by the evergreens, was the Vashon Island Airport with a grass runway, the airport meant for small aircraft. I never did hear a plane taking off or landing during the race. We all woke up when we ran past the Church. Protected by evergreens, St. John Vinney Catholic Church was on our left, at the five-mile mark on the course. None of us in the lead group needed to do arithmetic. We had two kilometers, 1.2 miles, to impress our will on the others.

Another left turn at the 5.33-mile point in the race, this time back onto SW Cove, we'd spread out on the road towards the finish. If any of us had another race gear, we'd shove on down into overdrive. Passing the 6-mile marker, if any of us had a spring gear, we'd max out to our potential, our leg turnover taking us over the finish line and through the finishing Shute. This time, in the last section to the finish, I moved from eighth to finish fourth overall. This after earning mile splits of 5:00, 5:30, 5:15, 6:10 (the Andes), 5:25, 5:45, with a 1:10 in the last 0.2 finish. Man, that was a fast race.

Bill Burby was the race director who had an oversized drawing of the race course set up at the finish, drawn in flowing black marker, with street names, landmarks on the course, and little animals added in. He was extremely direct in responding to anyone's assertion that the course was not accurate. He'd wheeled it twice, once each way. At that time, wheeling a course was considered the Rolls Royce of course measurement. The third time I ran the race; I asked the director whether I could take home the drawing. Reluctantly, he agreed. I enjoyed owning that drawing.

Bill Burby the race director having passed away in 1989, the race distance remained 10km, with an accompanying 5km added, through 2017, when the distance became only a 5km, now run from a different location on the Island, though it remains a part of the Island's Strawberry Festival. Now in the 21st Century, without prize money or another strong incentive, the 10km participation would be dwarfed by the 5km runners and walkers. The course is no longer hilly, one-half the length, and the goal is to enjoy the experience. The K2 Vashon Island Strawberry Festival 10km was for racing with a long touch of surviving the course's difficulty at full speed.

Each year that I raced the K2 Vashon Island Strawberry Festival 10km on Saturday, I would arise that Sunday for the Shore Run 7-miler along the Seattle side of Lake Washington from Seward Park along Lake Washington Blvd to Madison Park and back. I wouldn't run as fast a pace as I did on the K2, but I'd more than hold my own.

Running on an oversized island one day and along an oversized lake the next is a fun weekend. Change running to racing both days and the fun weekend becomes etched into my running brain. These weekends took place over 40 years ago for me, when I was young enough to be a runner with a fast racing habit, earning instant gratification in finishing high up in the standings before celebrating post-race brunch. Still running, still with a racing habit, I now occupy the back of the slow pack, race hard, and go to breakfast, without the instant gratification portion.

Shore Run morning; I'd awaken a bit later because I had a 10 a.m. start time. Driving to the start at Seward Park, I'd admire the view driving through the Dub, through the Arboretum, down E. Lake Washington Blvd, through the windy road in Lakeview Park, back onto E. Lake Washington Blvd past Viretta Park until E. Lake Washington Blvd became Lake Washington Blvd (no direction), keeping on Lake Washington Blvd before continuing straight on Lakeside Blvd S. (named for obvious reasons and the fact that Lake Washington Blvd veered away from the Lake) turned back into Lake Washington Blvd, now Lake Washington Blvd S., at Coleman Park Beach, until the road ran out at Seward Park. Visually, it was one of my favorite driving days of each year.

Parking along the land side of the Blvd, I would jog over to the race logistics center, eschewing the clothing bag option to be collected at the finish line. This was a one-way race. I'd warm up by running around the 2.4-mile park, covered in evergreens and protected by the Lake. lining up at the Seward Park entrance, getting into the race pace quickly, the first mile would include a view on the right of a lake inlet separating Seward Park from the Blvd and the lefthand view being of homes with views of it all. To the Mercer Island Floating Bridge, we had Lake views on our right, expensive lakeview homes on the left, the course replete with parks. Passing under the Bridge, we had more of the spectacular same, reaching Lakeside Park, for the gentle vier onto 39th Ave E. wherein the homes were very expensive, then onto McGilvra Blvd E., onto E. Madsion St. and a fast finish into Madison Park.

Hell, it was also fast, any uphill being more of a suggestion than an actual incline. This course was designed for fast, gorgeous views included. Running a steady pace “of only” just under 5:30 per mile, I’d hold pace heading north on the Blvd until we passed the halfway mark just after going under the Mercer Island Floating Bridge. Heh, there were many of us in the top 50-75 racers who had the same idea. In hindsight, I would notice that I raced the first 10km in almost the same time I had raced the day before on the K2. Waking up at 5:30 pace, adjusting the effort, I’d flow the last three miles at 5:15 per mile pace. So much fun.

I always jaunted back the seven miles to my car because I could. Also, I avoided the line for the bag collection and the wait for the bus back to the start. Of most import was that I had the same views, in reverse, at a much more leisurely 8:00 jog pace. A 17-mile morning running in perfect July weather cannot be topped. Invariably I’d jog along with a fast group also running back to the start. Invariably, they would initially scoff that I managed to only finish in the top 20 or so. Invariably the tune would change when I casually dropped my race result from the day before. Ego flaring on all accounts.

That race is gone, replaced by a 10km/5km, under corporate sponsorship, without much to offer. Even the views are altered, more emphasis on the after-party. I’m truly not a “get off my lawn” guy. But I would be remiss to ignore that some things that are no longer are truly no longer. Cie la vie.

Before the Pandemic, the Frostbite Half Marathon - part of the Tennessee State Parks Running Tour now in its 46th year, the half marathon being run the first Saturday of February – in its heyday had just under 1,000 runners each year. The Pandemic effect dropped participation to just over 100 runners this year. Each version of the course over the years has been hilly, challenging, and hard. This race also attracted the toughest veteran runner and oftentimes some very fast collegians. Not no more. The race now includes a 5km accompanying the half. The slippery slope to a 15km/5km is in the foreseeable future.

I raced the 5km because my half marathon race pace embarrasses me. That pace would only worsen with the long, steep hills in the rural state park. I raced hard, my pace was 9:50 per mile. I did race for the while hoody without ads on the back, so there is that. 27th of 87 is not a happy result. Anyway, its’ not all bad. Jimmy’s singing on the streaming device.