

Island Running

*But if you close your eyes
Does it almost feel like nothing changed at all?
And if you close your eyes
Does it almost feel like you've been here before?
- Pompeii, Daniel Smith*

February is cold. Never changes. Always cold. I wake up cold. I go to bed cold. The same feeling repeated each day until it's not. That moment is called March. That's not February.

There is the pineapple express in the coastal Northwest, whizzing in from the Pacific Ocean in the middle of February, raising the temperatures from a bone chilling, arthritis encouraging, enveloping dank musk, all accompanied with a constant need to bundle up in front of a warm fire, to a sudden, pleasant warm feel in the air, followed by a joy to be outside. Quiet runs, absent of others, become joyous group runs, each delighting in the running company of others.

Seattle receives the pineapple express effect. From Halloween until mid-February, I kept the faith. Faith that running would soon be fun again, and that the express would bring a bounce in my step, a joy in my heart, and a step closer to the two months before June. June could be so awful in Seattle. But I digress. Shedding running layers, even for a short time, was a joy in itself.

Lake Washington lay on the east side of Seattle, on a still morning emanating a beautiful reflection of Mt. Rainer to the southeast, no matter the time of year. This is especially so in the early morning, viewed on a run along Lake Washington Blvd heading south to Seward Park before reversing the view back, my eyes darting from the still lake water to the evergreens holding up the top of Mt. Rainer, lifting itself into the sky, covered in snow, the large ice cream cone, well licked.

The Husky crew, in never ending preparation for their spring season, gliding smoothly along the lake adjacent to the shoreline, cut but a sliver in the water, seeking a faster stroke in achieving the shell's traversing the 60-mile lake tour. Eight in the shell, with coxswain, pulling in unison approaching me, passing me, before becoming a distant

blip on the water, the coxswain occasionally giving me a slight nod, depending on how close the shell was to the shore.

Coincidentally, the largest island in Lake Washington, Mercer Island, with its very wealthy island inhabitants living in their northwest-inspired wealthy homes, each with views of the Lake, the forested hills, the distant mountains, the clear skies of the Northwest on a day without rain that is, held a half-marathon traversing the Island's entirety, hilly as it is, with the incoming warm air brought by the pineapple express. The Mercer Island Half Marathon was always marked on my race calendar, well in advance.

At its height, just under 1,000 runners would do the hilly circuit from Luther Burbank Park, running atop the Lid above covering the I-90 tunnel through the Island to West Mercer Way, meandering the hilly views of Southeast Seattle, Seward Park, and Rainer Beach to the Island's south end before capturing the view of Mt. Rainer, then turning a sharp left where the Island's main road becomes the much more windy East Mercer Way, the meandering hills displaying Newcastle Beach across the Lake's sliver along with Newport and Newport Hills, the Beaux Arts and West Bellevue all the way to North Mercer Way and the finish at Luther Burbank Park. Not that I know the route by memory, or anything like that.

Needing the pay from coaching the Mercer Island High School Islander track team's distance runners while I was matriculating through the University of Washington on my way to a graduate school of some sort, I learned almost every street, road, lane, incline, hill, and park on the Island. That was daily living and running for those living on the Island. In running those hills with the team's runners, I taught myself the intricacies in training younger distance runners. The runners I coached taught me of silent grit and of high achievement, the kind demonstrated by their parents through silent actions, the same being expected of their children now teens.

Repeatedly, sociological studies show that placing a child in an environment of success leads to the child being successful. Personal experience taught me that fact. Raised on food stamps and a whole lot of love from my single-parent mother, she made certain that as often as we moved that we landed in college towns, surrounded by motivated children of highly-educated parents, in an educational environment wherein the parents, the teachers, the school district administrators, the town, and the kids, all felt the desire to achieve.

The Islander runners I coached were a cut even above my experience. Achievement through self-motivation is one thing; having that same motivation in an environment of wealth is an entirely different level. Nourished and nurtured, self-driven and supported, these teens succeeded. Accompanying their experience was an ‘us against them’ mentality pervading their growth, their experiences, and their athletic teams. The Islander football team, toughened by being spat on by other schools in the conference, annually won its way into the state playoffs, as did the boys and girls basketball teams, the baseball and softball teams, and in swimming, tennis, gymnastics, cross country, as well as track and field. Winning, achieved success, and maintaining high standards comes at a cost, but losing was not an option.

While I coached the distance runners, I encouraged them to run the Island’s half marathon, to train through the dreary, endless, bone-chilling, dank, oftentimes rainy winter. And, a handful of them would, which never failed in pleasantly surprising me. Teens want to be part of a pack they can call their own. More than one, actually. My encouraging them to train together for the Island’s half marathon created one more tight pack, involving claiming the Island as their own. (That I can, to this day in my own life, find a running route, and after having run that route more than a couple of times, give a name to that route, claiming that route as my own, is my homage to those Islanders.) Rhetorically, how cool is the ability, once a year, to run the entirety of the Island without sharing the road with traffic.

Race morning, I would drive myself to the Island from the U-District. we’d line up close enough to the race start lineup to avoid being in the way of the elite runners in front of us, keeping the slower runners behind us. Running alongside and over the Lid was gentle in elevation gain and loss. Not so much when the race headed south on West Mercer Way. Island hills are usually steep, short, memorable. Mercer Island is no different.

But we ran on those hills almost every day. The loops from the high school. The routes from the different homes, the many parks, the other schools. Each run included merely not just the long hills, the short hills, the repeats of each. Those runs taught us when to push an uphill, accelerating into the decline to the next curve in the road before the base the next uphill. Moving our small band of runners across the Island from one season to the next, repetition gave us insight into the half marathon course for which others weren’t prepared. No uphill was too steep or hard, no

downhill too steep or painful. The road curves hid what we knew to be our best weapon: we knew what was beyond the curve and beyond the one that followed.

Into the first mile of the race, including a quarter-mile uphill before turning south, followed by a half-mile uphill southbound to SE 24th Street, a long downhill to SE 32nd, a three-quarter mile uphill cresting just before Shoreclift Lane, a short up to a mile-long bluff down to SE 48th, then the long gentle run to the bottom of the Island. We knew to push the Shoreclift hill because the course evened out, leading to a long flatish section to the sharp left turn at the halfway point. As long as the first half didn't beat up the legs, the east side of the Island on East Mercer Way was the time in the race to count the runners we passed.

We'd relish in passing runners faster than we were, their exhaustion allowing us to move onto the next roadkill. With almost 1,000 runners, even being in the top 10-percent in the race meant there were tens upon tens of racers to pass and conquer. It helped that Island residents knew us, cheering loudly when we passed them. Racing that home island half marathon was a feather in the high school distance runners' caps, a delight in both the accomplishment and the effort.

I now live in a hilly town, within a hilly county, located in the middle of a hilly state. The routes that I've created, named, and repeatedly run are hilly. I know the inclines, the declines, the flat portions that follow each. I know the ascents, the descents and the accelerated sections. I run them in the same effort as so long ago on the Island, knowing the constantly changing terrain exhausts me, each segment of each route in times so much slower.

My running in this time includes flashbacks to other routes with their subtle changes. One route I run regularly in the nearby City's wealthy section reminds me of the island hills, another route in regional park near me is similar to the inclines of Marin County, another run brings the descents of the Southern California coastal canyons or the declines beneath the Boulder Flatirons. I have run, do run, and will run each without blinking or trepidation. I know that each turn, curve, and switchback leads to another running memory, and to the joy in my still running. Better to push the pace than give up the effort. My eyes are open. Though it's all changed, because I've been here before, nothing's changed.