

Get a Grip

Chasing him through the meandering roadway in the park, narrowing the gap between us by the Mile 10 marker before turning sharply right from the park, and crossing the busy street into the neighborhood with the modest homes, I finally caught him.

Over the last 4 kilometers, running stride for stride, my longer legs running shorter strides matching his longer strides coming from his shorter legs, both of us churning around the corners and one long roundabout, heading down the last straightaway, passing numbered street after numbered street, neither of us gave an inch to the other.

“Jumping” from the street onto the sidewalk through a small archway before twisting ourselves to the right onto the running path, both of us trying to find our sprint form for the last meters of the half marathon, we finished. Walking through the finish line, grabbing a water bottle, a banana, and a power snake, we agreed that the reward was worth the effort. Smiles and immediate memories from the race abounded.

This was my favorite half marathon course, complete with an opening two-mile stretch along a main thoroughfare leading from downtown, the street split by a wide, tree-sheltered median, historic homes built in the early 1900’s on each side, the residents relaxing on their respective lawns, cheering the large race contingent as we each ran by them. Flat, with a hint of decline, were the first 2.5 miles, leading to a long sweeping righthand curve, followed by an additional stretch down another long street filled with quaint homes, and fewer trees.

All that set up a sharp lefthand turn followed by another lefthand turn followed by a righthand turn on a half-mile pace-breaking uphill, requiring a constant deep breath intake to get up and up and up the hill, all the while noticing the styling of the homes along the way. This section always wore me down, my goal being to later pass each runner that passed me. I usually met that goal.

A sharp left onto a highway closed for the race met us at the summit of the uphill section, the highway leading us into an upscale neighborhood filled with bricked McMansions, wide streets, and so much tidy foliage to keep us occupied while running along this up and down array of sweeping streets towards the north, before

the course melded with a less well-to-do feeling, a long downhill taking us to the main highway that cuts the town. With the police protecting our multitudinous crossing, we were halfway, the park lying just ahead.

This was not just any romp through just any park. We were offered two miles of a crushed gravel path meandering under a canopy of tall trees fully leafed in the late spring, the sound of a small brook babbling to our right alongside our soft path. This was my favorite part of the race course because I was racing. Running on a soft path, easing into and through the chicanes making up this long stretch carved from the edge of the woods, there were small undulations that I would instantly recall from previous years, the lone port-a-potty that he once had to use in a prior race, allowing me to pass him. At its end, 8.5 miles into the race, the path led to a pedestrian bridge over the train tracks, the bridge leading us north before a sharp right onto a platform we crossed before heading south down to the park proper.

The park was a big-ass park, filled with swimming pools, endless tennis courts, countless ballfields, with too many benches, picnic tables, and really, really tall trees to absorb. On the park's roads, we raced straight ahead, turning right, following the long sweep to the left onto a road portion alongside a small lake with a fountain flowing, another right onto the main road section sweeping right to the park's eastern exit, leading to the Mile 10 marker. Racing through the park exhausted me. Every time I ran the race.

I blame the morning's heat finally arriving, the sun now beginning its daily beatdown of the sun-faded black asphalt, there being fewer and fewer shade trees and even less shade. Period. Out of park for the last 5km of the race, I usually forced my will into my body, coaxing it to hang on. A seemingly long neighborhood street, modest homes with modest lawns on each side, led to a lefthand turn onto another long neighborhood street with modest homes with modest lawns on each side, before a righthand turn towards the large roundabout.

All of that exposed the long straight street, with abandoned homes, small warehouses, the sense of decay emoting from the forlorn stretch of road taking us back to the quaint downtown. With runners stretched out in front of me, and more trailing behind, the morning's heat now beating me down, willing myself from one intersection to the next, counting downwards the numbered streets, the battle to

keep running fast raged inside me. I would win the inner battle but took heavy casualties in the process.

This year was different. I felt crisp in the beginning, better in the uphill section, easy in the upscale neighborhood, smooth on the crushed-gravel path, maintained that through the long stretch in the park, and to my surprise, race ready in the sun. After catching up to him, we tacitly joined forces in achieving the silent goal in holding our race pace to the finish. Knowing we would not be on the podium; we raced carefree to the end. Our race performances were awesome moments for each of us.

I had no clue, indication, signal, demonstration, evidence, omen, portent, forewarning, hint, or symptom, that this race was my last great race. Or, that this race was my last good race. Finally, this race was my last race in which I was actually racing, not merely running. This race, on that morning, was my last good race. I was 62. I'd been running races since I was 19. It was a helluva run.

Four years later, my racing pace is two minutes a mile slower. I am slow. Racing now is registering for the race, showing up at the race start, pinning my race number onto my running shorts, waking my running legs with a slow warmup, lining up with the slower-looking runners, firing off the line at the gun, only to be passed immediately by anyone and everyone. I'm sad. On a good day, I race with the mid-packers, the ones who are young, running on a lark, with the middle-aged running moms and pops, who "don't look like runner" but are obviously faster than me, willing to push themselves, and I run with the slow ones, the ones who have a semblance of balance within themselves.

For a time, just this year, I was in my own dungeon, run/walking where the walking was faster than the run portion. Turns out that it may be a medical issue that may or may not get fixed. Before that, I steadily became slow, slower, to slowest. Though I still think about the next run, plan it, anticipate it, and complete it, despite the end result. All of that remains engrained in my brain. My mind offers only positive thoughts, only the results are sadly, painfully different.

I now run solo, because I am unable to keep up with the running kids on our Saturday morning long runs. I can't even see them after the first half mile of a run. They keep inviting me to the weekend's long-run route. So, I show up, get through best I can, yell at myself for my lost abilities, and head to breakfast. They are kind, never mentioning

my now being so slow, they order my post-run breakfast to be ready when I finally arrive following my slower effort. They listen patiently to my lamenting my lost ability, though I've stopped saying anything. No reason to pound on the obvious.

I like running. I am reminded of this for just the ever-so-brief moment just as I complete a run when a whiff of accomplishment and a distant-feeling rise in my positive mindset each pass through my head. It doesn't last long, but I do feel both, albeit fleetingly.

The effort feels the same. The result is so very different. I ease into my day's planned run, picking up my pace to where I know I can hold for the run's duration. Once upon a time, a bad running day was a run done at a much, much quicker pace. I have decades of running logs telling me how fast I was in a prior time. Now, I refer only to runs done in the last couple of years, the runs before that being antiquated and not relevant.

Coming to grips mentally, emotionally, and spiritually requires a patience I did not know I had and acceptance I am not ready to give myself. Or so I think. For purposes of this piece, running is the basis upon which I've developed my path to sharing. My living life fully doesn't require me to run, but it certainly is a nice addition. No matter my pace, my running takes up only the time to get to the day's route, run the route, returning home following the usual post-run stops on the day's list. There remains a marriage to enjoy, work to finish, chores to list and complete (very important to have a list so that the completed task can be lined out), meals to be prepared and eaten, downtime to reflect. Life should be a process in achieving variety.

I ran a 5km yesterday and for the first time, my finishing time was double my lifetime best effort. I placed second in my age division, the runner ahead of me just 20 seconds ahead. I never saw him. I finished in the top 25-percent of the race entrants. I don't recall seeing any of the top finishers, surrounded as I was by others trying hard to run faster, like me. This week upcoming, I'll run five, or maybe six, days, some runs being easy in pace, others will be run with the intent of increasing my race pace beyond my current ability. During one of those runs, I will have and hold onto a brief segment in fast running. It will be fleeting, but I will notice. I'll feel the smoothness in a faster pace, an easy moment during a run made up of many different moments. I will also reflect that I am that unseen flower blooming in a forest, a gorgeous sight that only I see.