

Race Me

After wetting my index finger, lifting it up and away from my body, I determined whatever breeze there was wafting inwards through the canyons from the Bay was minimal. I wouldn't need a windbreaker for this run. What I needed was endurance, strength, and speed for the run. And that was just to keep up with all the other boys and two girls. Just another Wednesday night on the rail trail.

The midsummer midweek after-work run started quietly enough. No one complained about another long workday, conversation centering about the local professional team's win from the night before, the upcoming weekend plans, and the after-run pizza and beer. We were always about the after-run meal and mead. First things first.

Heading onto the asphalt-covered path, the semi-rural roadway alongside our left, and as per usual, one of us stating the mandatory pronouncement that they were not going to run this 7-mile out and back at a fast clip tonight ending the recitation that the rest of us could run as we determined. There was a general consensus that running easy sounded good. This was an after work weekend night run before dusk and we had all hustled to meet up at the trailhead and the first three workdays had been rough and we had two more workdays to go and we had a weekend long run ahead of us and we had a challenging track session the night before this run, so perhaps a slightly slower run made sense. Wasn't going to happen.

In our collective, we assumed we ran this course more often than we actually could. Though the run was seven miles, and we were able to get it done in under an hour on an easy effort, we could only do this weekday version in the summer, in the early evening daylight, before darkness took over. Woe unto us if we didn't start in sync with the sun's time schedule. Without street lights or lights on the trail, finishing in black darkness was less than ideal. We knew this from one painful experience during which we walked the last 1.5 miles because we could not see our feet, much less the path.

I have the receipts. As a group, we ran this route only two to three times a summer. Being part of the larger running club's midweek rotation, we either had to wait for the rail trail to pop up in the mix, or breakaway as a smaller segment of the club. Because we considered ourselves the fastest within the running club, we chose weeks in

which we ran this route, eschewing the larger collective. That is to say, we ran this route when more than a couple of us felt the need to push the pace. That need was usually met on runs like this one.

No matter how fast your running pace rarely is that top-end pace met at the first step into the run. The lungs need time to expand, the legs time to adjust from sedentary walking to clipped running pace, and the brain needing the opening portion of the run in switching gears, focusing on the new task brought to bear. On some runs, the time required to get into pace may take up the entirety of the run. Other runs, not so much. Like this evening's twilight run.

This was the rail trail, slightly up and slightly down. Vegetation on both sides of the trail well maintained, thin leafed trees lining the trail, benches, mileage markers, and slight undulations known to us on the trail, we knew what we were getting into and why. A continuous ever so slight incline to the turnaround 3.5 miles away from the trailhead followed by – you guessed it – a continuous ever so slight decline the entirety of the return to the cars. Though the trail was interrupted with several well-marked road crossings, the area surrounding the trail was not overcome with suburban traffic. Rarely did we see the need to stop when a car was crossing over the trail. You can infer from that what you will.

The rail trail suffered no fools, much less the weakness of mind and body. Despite the first mile being run gently away from the workday, we knew that at some point on the run would no longer be easy in pace. Light, quirky conversation enveloped our first mile, always someone taking the moment to notice the slight incline, responses being merely a quiet nod. Into the second mile, the route hung a sharp U-turn back alongside itself, just a bit higher in elevation than the trail section before it. This is where the trail opened up, with much less foliage and a long view to a wide curve to the right well ahead of us. Just past the U-turn is when one or two in the group would slowly begin their acceleration, the rest of us being aware of this change in pace.

Conversation continued, but we were quieter now. Around the next bend was the turnaround, opposite the road from the local private university tucked into the foothills, the manicured campus grounds, the coordinated college facilities matching in color the surrounding hillsides. Beyond the bend was a longer stretch into the next quiet town, its homes nestled into the canyons and hills. We rarely ventured that far on a weeknight, saving the full distance of the rail trail for a weekend

run. Tonight, it was enough to earn the turnaround together, at a pace we could all appreciate, together.

The agreed-upon rule was that we each touched the trail marker post at the turnaround. The unspoken rule that followed was to wait for one of us, any one of us, even the foolhardy to say, “race me!” before we dropped the hammer down. We never spoke of our picking up the pace to all out go for it running. We all just knew. Like a good melon, we just knew. Including the one who had said they didn’t want to run at a fast clip. No matter than our per mile pace had dropped from an opening 7:00 per-mile pace to just above a minute per mile faster to the turnaround, and never mind that holding that faster pace would have been a decent run, we collectively felt the need . . .

Two women and several men strong, we collected ourselves, gulped down air, abruptly increasing the running pace. Running in pairs, staying on our side of the trail, we raced. With almost no distance between the lead pair to the few running behind, it felt like we were racing. With each stride we gobbled down the trail we knew were closer to the finish. And that was the goal: finish like we meant to finish. The silence was deafening.

Strides are altered in race-pace mode. The eyes rivet the head to the steps ahead, the head resting on a strong but relaxed neck, the neck pushing down the shoulders, the shoulders letting the shorter arm swings sway the contest, the clipped arm swings allowing free-swinging hips, the hips’ strength leading the knees in making their best impression in shock absorption, the ankles taking the brunt of the force, the toes staying within themselves. And as this is all physiological, the mind leads the attack.

Get to the U-turn in reverse as fast as you can, as fast as the others, faster than the others if possible. Don’t admire running in the canyon in the summer. There is no other scenery than the asphalt in front of your next stride. (Well, okay, all the guys’ heads turned slightly when the pretty girl passes on her bicycle, but that’s a rule to be followed. Just don’t gawk.) Collectively, you are committed to the result. Fading away now is not racing. There will be stories to share from this run, all of which will be embellished between ordering the pizza and the first sip of the adult beverage. The push to the U-turn is palpable. No one is backing down. Places change. Rhythmic steps are exchanged.

Into and out of the U-turn, positions are established, only to be changed repeatedly. A quick glance of a digital GPS running watch would have shown sub-5:00 per mile pace. One, those watches were not yet available for this run and two, no one was going to take that glance. We knew how fast we were moving in our final stretch run. Still, there were others of us to catch, move alongside, and pass on the way to the finish. We were an undulating centipede made up of runners, each with their own fastest pace possible style. No one gave an inch.

Because the last 25 yards of the trail leading into the trailhead parking lot narrowed into a single-track width, the known rule, adhered to out of personal safety was that the run's finish was the bench just 75 yards from the trail entry into the parking lot. Pragmatically, when traveling at the rate of speed we were running, shutting it down any later would be a foolhardy launch into slamming into something. That caused the last quarter mile to the bench to be an all-out sprint.

Not only did running this route in this manner require endurance to maintain any sort of running pace for seven miles, and the strength in running the ever-increasing pace, there had to be sprint power to finish. Natural ability, disciplined training, the love of running, and the joy of racing led to our being here on this trail at this time at this pace. We piled each of those requirements into this one run. This turned out to be the best route we had for group success. Of course, we weren't giving any of that consideration over the last quarter mile. None of us wanted to be last.

Inches. In the final effort, running turned to racing becomes inches. Inching forward, just around the runner ahead, keeping a following runner inches behind. Holding that hard fought-for inch yet, inching closer and maybe inches ahead of the next runner. The one leading, fortunate in gaining more inches than the others, acquiring the mindset to not give up the inches, strides to the bench in a full-out rush, hitting the stop button on the running watch concurrent to stepping just off the asphalt onto the dirt beside the trail. The rest pour past the bench, repeating the motions just accomplished by the leader, gulps and gasps taking command. By the time the group regains the parking lot, there is no sign of the race-pace effort, just perspiration and a collective sly grin. Why run easy the entire way when you can, with the help of others, run faster. A moment's gift, shared, kept in the memory banks. Let's do it again, no matter the pace.

Race me.