

Seconds

Turning for the last time in the race, seeing the Finish Line Banner just over a half-mile away, casting my eyes downward to my right wrist, fleetingly catching my overall in-race time, seeing the third place runner just 50 yards ahead, I suddenly knew I could both break 15:00 for a road 5km for the first time and seize third place. I just needed more focus and a few less seconds.

This was four decades ago, in a road race associated with a festival held in a nearby city. Before smart watches, before magic shoes, and before I aged, I had more than a modicum of distance running ability coupled with sprinters speed. I wasn't the strongest short-distance runner, though I was a faster sprinter than most. Both have long since left me, but not on that morning.

While the struggle for the race win played out ahead of me, the competition for third and the podium was reduced to me and the fellow just in front of me. I'd chased him for the first 2.5 miles, pushing my own pace to the edge along the town's main thoroughfare, through the various turns in the subdivision neighboring the main street, and onto the final race stretch.

The lead pack that included me hit the opening mile mark in well under 5:00. Though I wore a digital running watch, there was no corresponding mileage to read. I assumed the first mile was short, pushing onwards hoping to stay with the leaders as deep into the race as I could manage. Over the middle mile of the race, run most along a shaded street, the two leaders pulling inexorably from the two following behind, me included the runner in third darted sharply into the righthand turn, accelerating through the turn keeping ahead of me. Gliding through the turn, pacing my effort, I closed the gap when the course straightened out. I was just seconds behind him.

The race adage is don't look back. He looked back with 600 yards to go. Smiling inwardly, I let out a slight heave of air, found my finishing sprint form, and held onto that paced effort for dear life. Catching him with just one-tenth of a mile to go, seeing the digital race clock, I knew I would break 15:00 and he would finish behind me. Crossing the finish line, oblivious to the screams and cheers of the crowd around us, I garnered third place, for the first time going under by seconds the time I wanted for so long.

The two of us passed the 20-mile marker of the marathon stride for stride. Though she was much shorter than me, her turnover matching my short stride allowing for my high cadence, we'd grown accustomed to the vagaries of our respective running styles for the last 13 miles, my having caught up to her just after the 10km mark of the course. We'd only had one conversation. At the 10-mile mark, she realized she couldn't get ahead of me, asking me what was my goal finish time, I told her. Informing me that she wanted the same finish time, we hunkered down in silence.

This was a race designed for the entrants to qualify for Boston. Nothing magical about the race: show up prepared to run a consistent pace for 26.2 miles, the pace needed to not only run a BQ, but also a pace equating to several minutes or more below the necessary pace. It always seems doable in training. Though I'd accomplished the BQ time for the following April, I knew I needed a faster finishing time to be safely under the needed standard for my age. Four decades later, I was still chasing seconds.

From passing the half marathon mark of the course, we both tacitly realizing we were in running rhythm, we began passing those slower in pace and those whose pace had dramatically slowed. I thought I was silently counting the roadkill until she giggled, asking me if I knew I was counting aloud. Chuckling, I kept counting, it appearing that no one we passed heard me.

Mentally more of a challenge than physically, the final 10km of a marathon can become like running with an anchor, or, it becomes a 6.2-mile self-coronation of determined success. Now into the heavily-shaded section, the course meandering alongside a small stream, the canopy of trees lining both sides of the course, the path gently curving to the left or to the right as the stream's course dictated, I lost count of those that we passed. I no longer concerned myself with the carnage we created. The race clock in our heads was pulsing. Time to go.

My running form felt good and I was in control of my own destiny. I decidedly picked up my race pace with each mile marker, to the point that I was running close to my own best for a 10km for me at this advanced age. She remained on my left, showing no discomfort in holding her own. Mile 26 passed, we saw the finish banner, she held out her right hand taking my left, raised them both in the air, celebrating our finish, both of us earning our same time goal by seconds.

By mile 23, I'd given up any pretense of racing my final marathon, my bucket list marathon, the one I'd saved for running for just this occasion. The race's 50th running matched my desire to end my running marathons. I just didn't plan how long this finale would take me. Ever the competitor, I'd run the arithmetic in my head. If I didn't walk, I could finish under five hours. I also wouldn't be last, which was an odd way to get to I wanted to keep my self-respect.

Jokingly, I had informed the others who had traveled with me, and who would run the half marathon, that they probably could finish their race distance, recover, shower, and eat brunch before I completed my last marathon. I was apparently spot in with my joshing prediction. Willing my legs to be coordinated while I traversed the main street that on race day was the long straightaway to the oversized banner affixed above the finish line, they stood in a pack, dressed in street clothes, looking well-fed and relaxed, cheering me on. It sucked.

Well before the halfway point of my race, I began feeling as if I were running backwards, each mile slower than the one previous. Not until mile 18 did I realize I was running with the back-of-the-packers, the runners determined in effort, desiring to finish just one step away from last, knowing that no cheering throngs would await their finish, no post-race food would be offered. They would finish alone, recover in solitary, struggle walking to their car, focused on getting to a place where they could recharge and move on.

There is no pity sought from these runners. They each covet their race effort, knowing that they will make the attempt again in another marathon, counting the passing of each mile as a series of gifts they've offered themselves. That there may be hundreds or thousands finishing in front of them does not concern them. They move forward, one step after another, uphill, downhill, along a flat stretch. Their goal is to finish, their overall time is not known to them until the finishing stretch of the last mile.

In that last mile, seconds matter. Not that they seek to break a certain time, finishing under a set hour mark, qualifying for Boston, or earn a race trinket. They. Are. Going. To. Finish. And if they are required to pass me repeatedly, in the last miles to achieve that finish, then I'll repeatedly be passed, repeatedly. This is when seconds matter to each of them. Precious seconds running in their effort to finish. Every second taken that slows them is a second wasted. Finish.

My epiphany in running, in racing, that seconds matter was five decades in achieving that self-realization. Few runners finish a run and ignore the time for that run over that distance. Internally, we each know an acceptable time for the myriad running routes we choose. There is no wishing away the result of any run. Seconds matter in the doing and completion of each run. Also acceptable to runners is the obvious fact that no one else cares about our precious seconds. They have their own precious seconds.

Running 12 miles today, I held together my pacing, accepting the discomfort in holding it together from the opening mile to the last. Clustering the miles together, the slowest only 25 seconds slower than the fastest mile split, in an overall pace that I couldn't have held just over a month ago, I found seconds I could shave off my time, reflecting the morning's effort.

Seconds saved requires focus. Focus in running with a relaxed form, focus in maintaining a steady pace for the duration of the run, focus in accelerating when needed to keep up that pace. Clutching those seconds as if each were a delicate flower, we cherish them when we finish our appointed task, reflecting on our day's achievement. Yet, just as soon as we gather our data, knowing we have many seconds to offer, we forget them. There is another run upcoming.

I have a lifetime of chasing seconds. I chased them over the passages of my race career, as a sprinter and as a distance runner. I chased them playing baseball, reaching base before the opposing team's pitcher could get a fast ball by me, or a fielder could throw me out. Seconds mattered when I caught a pass before the defensive back could tackle me. Those are my seconds that mattered. Seconds saved in other of life's ventures hold their own requirements, not relevant here.

I've not been cheated in saving my seconds in my running and I have the race shirts to prove that fact. Unfortunately, I cannot bank those seconds or hold them in trust. They are fleeting whispers of light, showing me the way through a forest of effort of my own doing. I play with them in my head, each second propelling me to the next run course marker. Yes, the minutes have increased, showing how I've slowed, but the seconds remain steadfast in their strength. They don't abandon me. They've always been my focus and I can't get enough of them.

Anybody have some seconds they can spare?