

## Highway to Hell

Some nights, when I am slow to fall asleep, I'll focus on that hill, climbing out of the forest and into daylight, with each step the running slows leading to a steeper grade. Less than a quarter mile from the crest of that mile-long hill, I hear that song, AC/DC's Highway to Hell. At the top of that hill, I see a shaggy-looking dude sitting on the back of his pickup truck, rear bumper down, exposing a boombox the size of Rhode Island, that song blaring. I fall asleep.

We raced our first Oak Barrel half marathon in 2010, when we were just beginning our 50's. We ran the inaugural event because Jack Daniels Distillery sponsored the race. Not that we consumed any jack. We drove the hour down to Lynchburg because the long-sleeved race shirt had an eye-catching logo in the shape of an oak barrel lid, the writing in bold cursive style. We drove the hour down to the race amidst the early April rain showers just to run a new course.

My annual spring allergy had kicked in so breathing and running concurrent to one another was a bit of a challenge. The first 2.5 miles were flat from the small downtown through rural roads, followed by 1.5 miles of a long, gradual incline alongside cow farms accompanied by cow aroma. What came next we had only read on paper: a steady beat of the drum mile-long uphill that never ended, until it did. The miles that followed rolled along a twisting set of rural roads leading to 4.5 miles of steep, then gradual downhill running with a final flat mile back onto the Jack Daniels grounds.

Without hesitation, he tacitly ran alongside until the last mile, finishing 27 seconds in front of me. we placed in the mid-teens for our age group. because of that hill our race pace was 8:38 per mile. Without that hill, the overall pace was 10 seconds per mile faster. the post-race air had warmed, the rain clouds disappeared, and we hung out with others of our tribe, watching oak barrels handed out for the age-group winners. Knowing we could race so much faster than what this day had given us; we vowed to come back the next year. The Little did we know . . .

We met a few years prior at a 15km trail race in a park outside a small town, wherein runners and trail cyclists shared a series of single-track paths that had more up than down. I finished in front of him that morning. The fact that I'd seen more than enough of him throughout the race led him to start up a conversation while we waited for our

cut glass paperweight as our reward. He was a retired US Army noncom now directing military recruits to their respective assignments. I was a scum-sucking lawyer. From our conversation, we learned that we lived in the same town, not far from one another. Exchanging cellphone info, we agreed to try to get together for runs. On some weekend runs, he would run with the tribe. Every once in a while, I'd be able to get in a weekday run with him.

2011 came. I had no seasonal allergy, racing under 8:00 per mile, including actually running fast up the highway to hell. I also flew the last downhill miles, passing more runners than I imagined were in front of me. That earned me sixth place in our age division. He was lling' and finished after me. we agreed we were coming back.

He and I ran together a bit more often, but my career is a tough taskmaster, and shared running was still rare. He is a positive fellow, always with stories to tell that merely skim the surface of his life's experience. Having fought in both Gulf wars, he had both occasional amusing anecdotes as well as the physical effects from being a career soldier.

At the 2012 Oak Barrel, he ran his best time, equaling mine from the previous year, finishing fourth – FOURTH – in our age division. My allergy kicked in and I finished five minutes behind him. The race swag settled into a very nice groove with a consistent race shirt or quarter-zip style pullover, plus running socks and a running hat, each with only the race logo and no other advertising.

The next couple of years found us separately dealing with our own issues. He found his true love, married, moved just two suburbs down from me. Whenever I did see him, he was the happiest I'd known him to be, recommitting to his faith, his life, his family. We still managed to occasionally run together, despite my more demanding schedule.

2013 saw us finish in the teens in our age division, he being four minutes ahead of my crossing the finish line. The good news is we were still running a race pace well below 9:00 per mile while remaining in the top 10-percent of the field of over 1,500 racers.

2014 brought each of us to a new five-year older age group. He raced faster, finishing sixth in our new division and with the seasonal allergy clinging to my lungs I hung on for 10th, just one minute faster than the year previous.

2015 brought me to a self-awakening, leading me to a career shift, becoming self-employed, complete with a home office, no commute, and plenty of work. There was the pleasant moment in which I informed my employer that I was giving notice, to which I was informed I couldn't quit, upon which, I did. Never looked back. The race result was my finishing just ahead of him with my time being a minute faster than the previous year and his being several minutes slower.

2016 saw him finish ninth in our division, me right behind him, He broke 1:50 and I was just over. Of more import, we each drove down to Lynchburg separately to receive our reward for having raced the first seven Oak Barrels: a below the waist lined black jacket with the number seven embedded into the race logo. The number seven is part of the Jack Daniels lore.

2017, with no allergy, I ran to seventh in our division, averaging just over 8:00 pace, including under 10:00 up the obnoxious hill, while he failed to break two hours for the first time, foretelling what was to come.

2018, I ran my second-fastest time and finished fifth in our division. His decline became precipitous, running a minute per mile slower than the previous year. From conversation, I gleaned he had slowed his training to spend more time with his bride and in addressing his health issues. We were about to turn 60 years of age.

2019, the last pre-Covid Oak Barrel race found me slowing by six minutes because of the seasonal allergies digging deep into my chest. I finished fourth in my new age division, just a few minutes behind third place. Had I been healthier, I would have gained the podium, taking home my coveted oak barrel lid. He remained in the younger age group, running 10 minutes slower than in 2018. I was sad for him but he appeared to be taking it all in stride, slowly.

Covid came in 2020. The world shut down in March. Oak Barrel is always the first Saturday of April, until this one year. Somehow, a means of distance racing made running the race in late October, the directive allowing us to start in pairs, separated by seconds. I raced under two hours but only by four minutes, again finishing fourth

in the age division. He improved by seven minutes, finishing 14th. At this point, with him busy taking care of himself and me with the last leg of my career, this race was the only time of the year our paths crossed. We makes our choices.

2021 returned all of us back to normal in so many ways. I again raced under 9:00 pace to fifth in our division and he was struggling with health again. This was our 12th consecutive year in racing Oak Barrel, two of only 23 runners to have run each race, a race that now topped 1,600 runners, registration filling within minutes when the fall application window opened. The race swag didn't change, we two simply became older.

2022 saw me slow in finishing eight in our division while he was quicker in finishing 25th. This was my last good year of races, before I began struggling with balance, my running form becoming a mixture of throwing myself into the next stride and attempting to maintain pace. My physical issue weren't his, but mine were moving quickly to being just as debilitating. See 2023.

2023 and I did not run below two hours for the first time while he finished over three hours for the first time. I left the race long before he finished. I drove home disgusted with my existence. I could only imagine how he felt about his running life. Then again, his outlook always seems more grounded than mine. My racing ended when I could not accelerate down any of the last five miles. I considered that perhaps I was chronically sick and didn't know it.

2024 saw me running in the age division for retired persons and him one year away. We both cemented the seeming end of our running careers with my again running over two hours in finishing ninth, feeling exhausted the entire race and he again finishing in over three hours. Then, life took a turn for the better for both of us.

He finally got the medical attention he deserved from the VA. He has bounced back with some incredible workouts and runs as seen on his Strava account. I can breathe and actually run again. I've run only a hilly 5km race on a cruel frozen morning into a harsh wind, but his pace is faster. He is simply faster every time he goes out the door for a run. The highway to hell mile is all his. He's gonna kick my ass at the 16th running of Oak Barrel.

And, he did.