

King of the Road

He is well over 6-feet tall and lean, with short-kempt hair. His chin is raised high towards spring's soft blue sky. He wears a ballcap on his head, shielding his eyes from the sun streaking through the newly-leafed trees along both sides of the path. A long-sleeved collarless shirt covers his long arms. A minimalist pair of hiking shorts just above his knees and a pair of mid-calf socks complete his wardrobe. His running shoes cover his long feet, the sole of his right outer sole worn down than his left. In his right hand he holds a tall walking stick.

He walks steadily, if not very slowly, on the bike path. Left foot reaching out in stride, it moving lightly over the path just ahead of him before landing gently on the balls of that foot, the right foot does not reach ahead in a stride similar to his left as much as it does act in a petulant manner in movement. The left foot drags along the asphalt path, the heel taking the lead. From behind him, the worn down outer sole shows great distress, absent much of the actual industrial-strength element meant to protect the foot when moving. His staff is firmly placed into the path with each forward progress of the right foot, a well-positioned stanchion.

His consistent lifting his left knee in rhythmically stepping forward with his left foot, it becoming firmly planted into the path, just before he attempts the same with his right, only to scuff the heel of his right shoe for the entirety of his right leg moving forward more of a heave than a step, he has a tempo with his self-styled walk. He will get there, wherever that may be, in his own time. Maybe it's long term effects from multiple sclerosis. Perhaps his peroneal nerve is compressed. Or, he has dystonia. Whatever the cause for his right foot drop leading to the obliteration in the heel of his right shoe, his walk is practiced, clearly honed from consistent effort.

Because of the gentler weather following a severely-harsh winter, I felt compelled to run repeats on the bike path. 1.5 miles from the trailhead, where the path's usually undulating elevation becomes flattish, just long enough to get in repeats up to three-quarters of a mile. Along this eight-mile long bike path, there are quarter-mile posts, strong in style and impressive in image, manly men posts. Each is set, wait for it, a quarter mile apart. I had taken up a once-per-week residence of sorts.

Each week found me changing the distance of the repeat, becoming accustomed to the subtle cracks in the asphalt, slight rises and drops along the way, in my

disciplined attempt to run the same pace in the “up” direction as I did in the “down” direction. Shaded from the day’s sun, shielded from the strong spring breezes, and devoid of others, for me the workout was a tranquil moment of my day.

My first week of repeats on the path this spring, I did not come upon him. He wasn’t walking when I ran the path that day. In early spring, I can hold off my run until late morning to noonish. The sultry heat of mid spring moves the start time from breakfast time to finish before noon. Late spring through Labor Day, the run starts at dawn. I’ll let you figure out the timing of the alarm going off.

That first week, I passed plenty of pedestrians with my running first in one direction and then in reverse direction, repeatedly. Some of them were even bold enough to walk without a dog. Occasionally, I’d see a runner heading towards me, to whom I would give the obligatory wave simultaneous to a smile and a “hi.” Mostly, I’d let my initial slow-moving gait naturally accelerate during my warm-up phase before plunging into the depths of focused pace, a self-created state in isolation.

In my return performance the second week, I began to see in my mind the landmarks along the path before I ran to and past them. The unexplained red circle in the middle of the path, the football-sized rock next to a tall, thin dogwood, the crack across the entirety of the path where the one-mile quarter-pole stood. Oh, and the deer munching alongside the path ignored me rather than scurrying away. I’d found my running space. Just at that moment, looking down the path, I saw his tall figure down path.

In my running towards him walking on the bike path, I first noticed that he was walking before I realized his impinged gait waws moving him forward. On this particular predominately straight section of the path, I see him from almost a quarter mile away. He emerges from the distant trees’ shadows, moving slowly, so slowly that I realize all that is amiss in his forward progress. My running pace towards him has me arriving to the next post before he has moved much past it in walking in the opposite direction.

When I run, my head is on a swivel, seeing all about me, what is ahead of me, and what I’ve left behind. I can multi-task when running. Focusing on those sights that interest me, my vision interpreted by my brain, I can recall the inconsequential along with those of importance. His walking towards me meant for me to stay to my side of the path. His walking style required more clandestine observation. Upon reaching

him, his chin held high, his right foot scuffing heavily, he looked down at me and spoke.

“You make running seem so easy,” he offered. “You’re so fast.” I laughed, thanked him and carried onwards with my task.

This day, my chosen workout was a series of half-mile repeats at half-marathon pace with a quarter jog at warm up pace. Truth being that the pace held no longer mattered. I glanced back to him, realizing as I did so that he had to get himself dressed for his walk, get himself out of his house and into his car, drive himself to the trailhead, get out of his car, and begin his stilted, challenged walk on the bike path. Meanwhile, all I had to do was to run.

In my back and forth on the path, I would pass him several times, while he maintained his pace heading in one direction, his left leg leading into him planting his walking stick into the asphalt, his right leg scraping the ground to keep up. I paced my running through my fatigue as he guided himself with a steadied gait, his legs alternating a constant lift and drag. I ran; he walked. Both of us using as much energy as possible in our individual efforts to succeed.

This past weekend, in early morning too warm of temperature from a tropical wind blowing out of the south at 30 miles per hour, the air over saturated from that same air, I started a half marathon. Not in the first mile, which became my fastest mile of the race, but definitely by the fourth one, I thought of him. You don’t race well between 8 and 10 am in 80 degrees, 80-percent humidity, with a dew point above 160, a constant wind swirling about you. I ran and I walked and then, I jogged and walked, before I slowly moved faster than a walk.

The third mile has a quarter mile steep incline. I walked that portion. The fourth mile is an insistent, never ending incline into the woods. Jogging that in anticipation of the steeper neighbor fifth mile, the morning’s reality sinking in that I would not be racing on this day on this course, I noticed a short, thin gentleman standing off the side of the road, a waist-high cane in his right hand. I softly waved, saying thank you, and he responded with a wave of his own.

In that fifth mile, there are two long stretches of very steep uphill in an already steep mile. The incline is relentless, made bearable only by the heavy shade of the deep

woods into which the runners climbed, the sound of mixed heavy breathing along the long, winding up was ceaseless, my breathing included. I walked both of those segments of this mile, imagining I had my own walking staff, wondering where the crest of this steep ended and what he would think of it.

I had the same thoughts a mile later following the mile-six marker, when the course took us up a short but even more steep incline before depositing us on the ridge, wherein we all took residence for the next two miles. I walked that angry-looking incline before resigning myself to focusing on moving forward, no more worry about placing or competing, but finishing. Walking and lingering through water stations, my vision becoming transfixed on the next hill, gentler than the one previous, an epiphany reached me.

There would be both other races for me and more to the point, daily runs, wherein I would run faster, improve my running pace, and actually race. And so would the fellow on the bike path with the walking staff. He gets out his door for reasons similar to mine. He wants to move, to walk his route in a pace and time he expects. He wants to feel the improvement in his own pace from his effort. He wants to know he is alive, feel his living, each from his determined, directed moving.

Consistency counts for more than we appreciate. We each choose to be consistent. Or not. Arising in the morning, getting ready for today, working in our employment, focusing on our many relationships, giving ourselves that moment each day in cherishing ourselves, finding our own means of surrounding us with the joy in the moment, followed by another and another. That is precisely what he is accomplishing when he walks, showing himself and others the effort he willingly undergoes to achieve that one simple, straightforward goal.

Having dodged the strong wind for almost the entire race, the final mile was finally into that blowing sultry-hot wind, hitting us full force two steps after we ran the final turn. I walked, head down, pulling myself into that wind until I felt the strength to increase my walk to a run. It wasn't a quick turnover, but it was a solid effort at the end of a long morning's endeavor. And, having taken the next day off, two days later, as I have almost daily for decades, I went out for a run on the bike path. I saw him, waved to him in my passing with a smile. He waved in return. I returned my focus to running. It was fast.