

## Filling Station

Even though we found ourselves dining in a slightly shabby small German-themed bar and restaurant in the middle of a Sunday afternoon in a small rural village in the Hudson River Valley in New York State, the eight of us having taken over the large table by the window and door and only restroom in the back, six of us with cellphones placed face down on the table except when one of us was checking our separate device while consuming beer made in the US and food prepared from German recipes handed down from the Rhineland each accomplished while 11 conversations carried forth between us, directly in front of us, angled across the table from us, even from one end to the other, our collective subconscious remained at the ready.

The anticipated moment started the Thursday previous to this day – well actually, it started further back than that when we each booked our flights to and from the airport nearest the Hudson River Valley on the same flight to and from after each of us separately determined those were the best and cheapest flights – when we had to check in on our flight in obtaining the best group boarding available. By cellphone app or by computer, Southwest Airlines requires a check in no earlier than 24 hours before the scheduled flight time. We knew the drill.

We failed. By dinner time later that Thursday, through a group text, we all realized we had let the day get away from us, what with living life, packing for the trip, work, other more immediate matters using up our focus and attention, clearing out the back 40, taking out the garbage, and the like. We. Forgot. None of us were in the A Group, which includes the first 60 passengers to board first. That would have choice. None of obtained any of the B Group 60 spaces. Nope. We all were in the dreaded Group C boarding group that would board the plane last. And, we were absolutely the last ones. And we had carry-on bags requiring the silent struggle for overhead bin space while over 140 others watch you, a few with a personal stake in their already-stored carryon items if you choose the bin in which they placed their items. Group C is less than ideal.

We vowed we'd do better for our return flight home. Vows are good. Spending our visit over the next three days making certain we arrived at our appointed events, dining experiences, and race expo – did I mention we traveled together to run a race? well, I have now – we were on time, in good jest, and always excited to share

whatever event we undertook. Still, that check-in time for the return flight home lingered.

So, on that Sunday afternoon at the shabby German-themed bar, after having run the race across the Hudson River, seen the FDR Estate, the Vanderbilt Estate, and included a day trip to a cute upscale small Connecticut town, and after having dined in a throwback diner, at an Italian restaurant with leftovers to take back to our rental home, brunch in Connecticut, dinner at the Culinary Academy, and raced, we were now enjoying lunch. Loudly. But, when the appropriate time arrived to attempt the check in for the next day's flight home, practiced instinct set in.

A cellphone alarm could almost be heard above the fray and din.

One of our crowd announced the time.

In unchoreographed simultaneous movement, no further words were spoken.

Six of our eight reached our dining table for our respective cellphones.

Well-practiced thumbs were already alighting across the cellphones' screens.

No one spoke at first.

But then came the first giggle.

"Who's gonna get the best Group number?"

The race was on.

The exercise took less than a minute.

It seemed longer than that.

We each were awarded Group B for our efforts.

We were each pleased, announcing our number to one another with great delight.

Cellphones were replaced back onto the table.

For the most part.

More beer, more food, and one dessert were consumed.

The next day, lined up next to one another at the airport gate, lined up down the gangway onto the plane, lined up to find an open seat and a slot for carryon in an overhead bin, we spotted the last rows of the plane. Those six seats, three on each side of the aisle, were open. We rushed to those seats that no other passenger wanted. We filled that row like happy campers around a roaring fire roasting marshmallows and singing campfire songs. All that concerted effort got us to the back of the plane.

We were happy, all the way home.

I am now a year and a half passed retirement age, though I've not yet retired. I don't need the additional income. I just haven't fully divested myself of the work ethic. I haven't yet taken Social Security, but I am on Medicare and all its supplemental parts. I was once a proud man, important in my profession and in my mind. Medicare will beat all of that out of you. I am now one of many millions on Medicare, seemingly in a daily fight for routine medicines and equally as routine medical tests. My life hasn't slowed. If there are "golden years" to be had, so far, I haven't found that path to well-earned happiness.

And more importantly, my running has slowed down. I no longer lead the pack and I cannot keep up with the pack. In fact, I cannot even see the pack, the pack with which I've run for the last two decades. They don't wait. I cannot catch up. Even when they stop for a water break or even a restroom excursion. I am so far behind them, I am not even a blip on their running radar. I do make the after the run breakfast, however. No one's running during that meal.

My running pace became so slow as to be more of a walk/run than a run with slightly occasional breaks. I was making deals with running, planning more walking stretches into my run than the running portions. The running pace progressively matched the walking pace. The effort was becoming a daily rationalization within myself that because I wanted to run, this hybrid style was acceptable. I am only 66. I shouldn't be accepting that fallback position. Yet.

I began to notice I was fatigued and not only from my running. And, my lung capacity had dwindled. We each know our bodies and of what its many parts and functions are capable in achieving. I added up the rapidly-slowng running pace, the tiredness in each of my daily activities, the clandestine labored breathing, and the quiet failure in enjoying my life. All of that equaled a visit to my general practitioner, which led to the discovery from a series of blood tests that I had more than a low testosterone level. After three separate blood tests, the results showed mine was so far to the left of low that I didn't exist. I am familiar with that state. My GP sent me to my endocrinologist.

Did I mention I am a Type II diabetic? Only saying to me, "that would explain a lot," I was prescribed Testosterone Replacement Therapy. Close friends acquired wry grins when I informed them. Their minds went to libido issues or my wanting to be Arnold Schwarzenegger. I wasn't amused. I simply wanted my normal life back. I

wanted to run as a runner would run. I wasn't looking to win races or take over my age division. I am 66 and those days are long gone. Winning is sharing a conversation on a run. Running perpetually solo sucks.

So, on the morning of the half marathon over the Hudson, when one of our group offered that she would race with me, I was both chagrined that she was giving up her race potential for me and quietly ecstatic that she could carry me to a faster race time than I've done in some time. We raced together for the first nine miles before my form fell off. I've been under TRT for under three months; my energy level hasn't been replaced in full as of yet.

But she cajoled me over the bridge, majestic views up and down river, den mothering me to watch for the distinct cavities in the concrete paving across the bridge so that I didn't trip into the bridge surface. Yes, that's an issue for me. Taking turns leading one another through the forested bike path to the turnaround on the out-and-back course, I consciously compelled myself to stay a step behind, or alongside, or ahead, running a consistent race pace for each of the first eight miles. She never said a word after the bridge. She just stayed with me.

And, then she didn't. I had slowed slightly to a pace she couldn't run. She didn't accelerate, at first. But she sensed without looking back to me that I was slowing. I was now on my own. Keeping her in sight until the beginning of mile nine was a great effort. I would have managed it had I not needed to make a port-a-potty stop, waiting my turn in the effort. And then, my race finished with me on empty, though I finished in a somewhat respectable time, even with the stop. The result wasn't all that bad for the first real effort into my TRT era. I thanked her profusely afterwards, at lunch, and since.

In my race effort to hang with her, I realized that the therapy into my glute muscle and my consistently pushing my pace boundary will eventually result in my being able to run fast enough to hang close by in the weekend group runs. I may not get all the way there, but they will know I am there. I no longer want to resemble a race car running on fumes on the last lap at Indy, 250,000 people watching to see if the car will get across the finish line. But I don't need race awards or trinkets. I don't care about placing in a race as much as I do race in a race, pushing myself towards limits I used to have inside my abilities. Simply want to run with the group.