

Persistence

Running alone. Solo. Without a companion. No one else. On my own. By myself. But with a difference. I came to this morning's run with a plan. Putting aside that I come to every run with a plan, on this morning, on this running route, with purpose in my head, I forged ahead with my plan.

Not much to it, actually. Yet, the plan had more than enough substance to keep my mind busy. The weekend long run should be no shorter than 10 miles, at a minimum. Unless you have a route that is just over nine miles but less than ten. But it better be a weekend long run worthy of being less than ten miles. Say, a run out and back on the Golden Gate Bridge, or the Walkway over the Hudson, or any other long bridge with a pedestrian section and a view.

This morning's run started as a nine-miler, created through a confluence of being tired and bored from the same three weekend routes our weekend running group undertake each weekend on a semi-rotating basis. One cold, bright, cheery morning, on a hybrid 14-mile run, one of us took a 180-degree turn away from the long uphill stretch remaining to the regional park with the water fountain that is on every day of the year. Like lemmings to the sea, we took that turn.

Through a pedestrian tunnel under a busy road, up a short but steep walking path leading to the steep downhill that followed and leads into a continuation of the path alongside another busy road until we arrived at the intersection with a school entrance on our right and a neighborhood opening on the opposite side. We stopped. We looked around. We crossed the road to see what was on the other side.

The street – the street name starting with the letter A - leading us into the neighborhood was short, forcing us to make a lefthand turn onto a different street which name also started with the letter A, this one very wide with large homes on each side, meandering first up a long incline and then into a long winding decline, leading out of that neighborhood, blending onto another street with a name starting with the letter A, this one normal in width, meaning there was no room for street parking, with a sharp righthand bend, ending at the major thoroughfare leading into the bigger regional park. From there, the final three miles were a long, gentle decline on park paths back to the parking lot and our cars.

The Letter A loop was born. The course outline distinctively appears to be a barking dog, eyes closed from barking hard, standing on its hind legs. We liked the loop. The only failing of the loop was its length stopped at nine miles, not the ten we each required. So, we fiddled with the route to add on another mile. Couldn't do it. Adding a mile to the opening mile didn't work out well because there was no natural flow to the route, and, there was no consensus reached on that point. No one wanted to use the uphill to the regional park because no one wanted that uphill.

I began pondering this issue of adding one more mile. The Letter A loop skirts a hoity toity neighborhood connected to the bigger regional park, its claim to running fame being the paved walking path alongside a small stream, running down from the end of the neighborhood back towards the park. That four-tenths of a mile shaded and gentle decline is a choice moment on any run involving that neighborhood. I daydream about that section, but I digress. A mapping out of leaving the big park, running into the hoity toity neighborhood, running down the stream path, and back into the big park was just over a mile. Perfect. Also, the course outline now had the barking dog, eyes closed, standing on its hind legs, wearing a ribbon on its head.

So, we tried it, adding the hoity toity neighborhood loop into the Letter A loop. 10.36 miles later, we had a winner. Now the question became do we add that smaller loop at the beginning or the end of the route? Run clockwise, the loop's middle section is a series of arduous uphill's leading to a long, gentle decline to the finish. This clockwise direction has a "Boston" marathon feel to it. Run in reverse direction, the hoity toity neighborhood now included, the first 4.5 miles to the major thoroughfare leading to the letter A street neighborhoods is up and down, with the middle portion being a series of long inclines, long declines, finishing with a slightly different long, gentle decline to the finish. You take the high road and I'll take the low road. This is the running route I chose for my solitary effort on this morning.

That I have the audacity to even consider and plan my run's purpose, much less take a stab at conducting the running plan is absurd, had this been before this day. But, because my lungs can now carry oxygen, and my muscles have strength, and my legs respond to those two changes, and from all that my mood has shifted, my running is now a path of enjoyment, not merely an activity I used to enjoy. Yes, this change about is because of medicine, medicine prescribed to get me to and maintain the energy level requisite for a man of my age. And, we're gonna ride this train as long as is possible. Hence, the planned run.

One aspect of my current running remains unchanged from my prior running. I still run alone on the weekend runs because I am so much slower per mile than the others in my running tribe. Though we start out together, once we set ourselves in motion from where we are parked, well into the opening mile of any route we run, wherever that route is located throughout the metro area, I won't see them again until I finish, which is seemingly long after they have completed their collective run. The post-run breakfast still tastes good, with the accompanying conversations alight with humor, insight, and shared fun.

This morning, for one reason or another, I was the only one who could run. So, I showed up at the usual time to the self-appointed parking area to run the Letter A loop counterclockwise, pinning the ribbon on the barking dog's head first. My memory led me to believe that I'd not run this route in several months. Today was a good weather day to run it with an overcast sky, slight spring warmth in the air, the air just a bit heavy, and no wind. Healthy body, functioning mind, cooperative weather. I was out of excuses.

The opening mile is on a running path along a small, always water-filled stream. Mile two is a long, gently twisting incline on paths and quiet roads further into the big park, into and out of the hoity toity neighborhood, the choice moment included. Mile three includes a lengthy uphill climb back in the big park. Mile four follows with a continuation of the climb before scorching decline. The middle mile is a straight shot on a path to the major thoroughfare and the first half mile in the smaller neighborhood. Mile six leads into and out of the wide-street neighborhood and onto a downhill path. Mile seven is a combination of short steep up, the underpass, the long flow of the path. Mile eight is the hind leg of the barking dog, under the railroad tracks, then alongside the tracks to another path away from traffic to a water fountain, restroom stop. The final two miles are the long, gentle decline winding back along the opening water-filled stream, the path now teeming with other users.

Shaded, quiet, uphill, open, noisy, downhill, quiet, short intense moments or steep running, long, languid stretches of opening up the stride and pace. The loop has it all. And, when I am in good running form, the route is a self-given testimony to where I am in my own running. Today was a good day for my own tent revival meeting.

This morning, I had no goals. I had a plan. Run. Run as strong as I could each mile. Run persistently strong so that I held a consistent pace from one mile to the next, from one section followed by the adjoining section. Pace the running correctly such that the grouping of mile splits were within range of one another. Run the loop faster than I had previously. Run.

But first, I had to warm up my legs, open my lungs, and push past my at-dawn malaise. That meant, at my age, walking into a slog into jog into an easily-paced running form just to get to the verge of becoming an actual runner. It takes about a mile to accomplish the task. Shuffler by trade, runner by asserted aggression. I do what I can.

I took that plan with me into the run, broken down into mile-long segments, cognizant of the next pull uphill, the next open running stretch, the next turn, the next push downhill. The opening miles had cool air, air that I could taste. That air was followed by warming air over the final miles, air that I breathed in like that third cup of coffee. Though I fought my stride over the first half of the loop, I found my groove coming out of the neighborhoods, leaning into my rhythm.

I'm a "how did that first mile feel" runner. This morning's first mile along the stream was good, but not grand. I pushed and pulled from there. Though there was a constant sense of letting myself down, there was a deeper feeling that I was actually conducting the plan, though I could not pin down why I felt that way. My running one slow, predominately uphill mile, followed by a quicker mile with more flat and downhill portions, the watch showing consistent mile splits, even though I was tiring over the final miles. In completed the loop feeling satisfied.

Dining alone at my post-run breakfast, I scrolled on my running app on my cellphone, finding the results from the last few times I'd run the Letter A loop after having added the hair ribbon to the barking dog. Without changing my facial expression or exhaling my thoughts, I realized my constant angst during my run was all for naught. I had successfully carried out my plan, with just me knowing that fact. Immediately, the plate of food in front of me, the coffee, the chocolate milk, all tasted more to my liking. I was 40 seconds per mile faster than any of my previous endeavors on the loop.