

Uphill

The race was horrible. We'd driven down from the Sacramento area to the coastal county of Marin. We were registered for the seven-mile race on the dirt fire roads in the Headlands. It looked good in the write up for the race. Race in the coastal fog and the cool of the Bay Area summer on dirt roads, take on a couple of hilly sections and finish downhill to flat. Top 15 finishers receive race t-shirts with their finisher number displayed on the shirt. We were fast, we were young, we were race tough. We were foolish.

Just as neither of us had no clue yet what life after college would bring us, we had no clue in racing this course. It was a foolish race course: run along one side of a valley up a fire road, straight up, forever towards the morning sky, before the quick flat portion. And though the up route on the course was not straight, the road meandering with gentle switchbacks, because of the numerous turns and the low-lying cooling coastal fog, we could never see the crest of the roadway. All we saw was the dirt road beneath our feet because we were not looking upwards or ahead. That's just how steep was our endless trek up. Only the patchy morning coastal fog offering any respite from the climb. We couldn't see further than the distance from home plate to first base. Maybe.

We hit the bottom of that long climb just after a half mile from the start/finish line, the smooth strides of the runners quickly turning into short steps, bodies leaning into the hill's steepness. We knew instinctively that this was gonna suck. We just didn't how would be less than ideal this endless nonstop without break climb. We lived and ran in a very flat valley range. No overpass that passed as our hills could match this agonizing climb. And we willingly paid for the privilege of suffering up the long, damned fire road, large mile numbers poured with flour into the middle of the dirt road. Older runners each continually passed us. From where did all those old runners come?

Because we were smarter than everyone else in the race, we knew that at some distant point, in much higher elevation, no matter how many switchbacks we ran up the incessantly steep climb, the dirt road uphill portion of the course would crest. It had to be right after the next switchback. Yes? No. Finally losing count of the switchbacks, longing for a respite from the pain and fatigue building in our legs, we immersed ourselves in the mind-numbing trudge up the coastal valley, running in a

self-created hell we created for ourselves, longing for a full breath, and a view of something other than our racing shoes. Somewhere in the early morning fog, our most fervent and immediate desire was answered. We saw a course marshal steering us to the left along a cutoff road. We turned left. Happily. We turned away from the leg-ravaging, mind-depressing, physical meltdown of an uphill, running the short distance to the start of the course's downhill.

A downhill! Gleefully, joyously, we launched ourselves into the downhill dirt road, with its soft dirt footing, gentle switchbacks, steady decline angle down. We ran fast down the valley, the coastal fog cooling our shirts. We ran fast around each bend of each switchback, clamoring to get to the next one. Quickly. With great haste. Once again, we could breathe. Because we could breathe, we could run fast. Because we could run fast, we passed runners. Lots of runners. Handfuls of runners. Clumps of runners. We were on a mission to finish. Crossing the finish line in the mid-40's of all finishers, we felt both elated and a bit let down. While the downhill stretch was fun, that never ending uphill climb was not. We wanted revenge.

Not until college did I have the opportunity to learn to ski. Down a mountain. In snow. With below-freezing temperatures. Maybe sun, maybe not. It was my dad who taught me how to ski. Mostly, because that was his chosen sports activity. He never stopped thinking about skiing. Out of season, he would cajole himself to do ski-specific exercises while standing in line, anywhere. When Halloween rolled around, he handed out candy to the "crummy kids," waiting for the first snowfall in the mountains. Then, he waited for the ski resort to open, the one to which he held an annual season's pass.

During the season, he would travel up on a Friday into the mountain range to the cabin he purchased after his father passed. Just 15 minutes from the resort, he would night ski Friday, then ski the late morning to just after dusk on Saturday, followed by a morning ski on Sunday. He would ski through the last day of the season, always seeking one more run down the mountain. Then, I showed up to matriculate through and graduate from the local university. He had a built-in Wednesday night skiing partner.

In that first year skiing with my dad, he patiently taught me the ropes – literally – to skiing. By the end of that first season skiing, I could get down the run he would choose without falling down. For the most part. We even tempted my fate on a couple of

single-diamond runs, one effort leading me to ski on my back, head first, all the way down, receiving a standing ovation from not only my dad upon my reaching the bottom. He and I rode the chairlift to do that run again, correctly. He was generally a patient man, but with me, he became the most patient of instructors, and a cheerleading guide in my improvement, the improvement never coming fast enough to suit me. From that first year, he taught me about the subconscious mind. And, he taught me about apres-ski.

Because of that first ski season together, he opened up about his life. He was 40 years old that season and had never been in a parenting position to interact with me. He was not the custodial parent. We had much to learn about each other. Turns out, I had much to learn about improvement. Our best conversations were on the chairlifts, creaking slowly in the cold night mountain air, on our way to our next challenge to avoid disaster. Turns out, he was a voracious reader, including pieces on the nascent focus into the athletic mind and its connection to athletic improvement.

Sitting on the chairlift, always on the left side because he was more comfortable boarding the chair with his right hand, I listened to him describe how the mind will teach me in the off-season to be better at all aspects of skiing, explaining that because of the mind's complexity it had the ability to narrowly focus on so many items of our lives and to seek solutions, solutions to be put into practice at a later time, when needed. And, he was right. Through the spring, the summer, and into the late fall, I busied myself with college life. But from the second season together until grad school and life led me away, he found himself catching up to my skiing ability, offering only positive words. I cherish those apres-ski dinners.

The idea seemed so simple, driving back to Sacramento after the coastal mountain race. We'd train ourselves into being faster, meaner in our races, and fearless in our determination, forget the fact that neither of us were living or running in a mountain town, much less one with hills. No matter. We had a plan, mind-numbingly short sided as it was. A year later, we were again standing at the start line in the early morning coastal fog, knowing what was just around the first bend in the dirt fire road, without even seeing it. Just over three miles of an endless uphill along gentle curves uphill without a break. None. We demanded nothing less. We had a plan.

Going into the long climb, we located the lead clump of runners, and clung to the very back of that clump. Up, up and up we all went. We knew we didn't have to lead the clump, just hand tough. At every flour-marked mile number in the dirt road, I would look up from my shoes. I was still with the clump. After the mile "2" mark, I knew I could hang with those around me, though the effort was going to hurt, in a big way. I located the closes clump member and mentally hung on to his ratty race shirt. Breathing came hard, hard legs became weaker, and focus remained on the running shoes scraping dirt just ahead of me. Just then, the crest of the uphill, the course marshal, and flat ground all coalesced, leading along the ridge to the downhill.

Counting runners ahead of me on the ridge, I could see that a was just two runners out of the top 15 and the shirt. I wanted the shirt, never mind the number. I wanted the shirt. Now, it was all downhill. I wouldn't have to breath hard, I could look ahead of me, and I could race fast. I'd raced myself to exhaustion getting to the top, close enough to the lead clump to touch the cloth of a shirt I envisioned in my head. Just before the turn down, I sucked in a big gulp of coastal air, looked down into the valley below, and went for it.

The young runner is light of foot, short on life's experience, and willing to race to the death without hesitation. No race course phases them in their quest. They are in the moment. Down I ran, churning up dirt road dust behind me, never once pondering how far back he was. Around every gentle turn down into the valley, I closed in on the runners in front of me. Coming out of those turns, I accelerated to a pace even faster than the one I held into the turn. Those just in front of me could hear the light tap of my shoes atop the dirt. I was coming.

Just before the downhill portion bottomed out into the flat stretch to the finish, I caught one, reeled him in and put him behind me. One more. In a seeming rush, I alighted upon the next runner, who I could tell was at his top end speed. When his left knee gave just a little buckle, I pounced. Upon passing him, the finish line now within sight, I knew if I held my position I had the last numbered shirt in my grasp. In my periphery I saw him glide past me. Damn. I found one final gear in my legs, pushed my pace, held form, managing to only stay just off his shoulder. Damn! Just yard from the finish, we both came upon a runner, who had just then lost his form. We never saw him until we finished under the banner, mere steps ahead

We both earned shirts.