

Cruel Summer Running – Not

Every major city in the various regions of the US have a weather reputation: San Francisco has the coldest winters in summer; an entire omelet can be cooked on a sidewalk on a typical summer day in Phoenix; a summer snow storm in Bozeman is a regularity; Los Angeles is perfect. We hate LA, unless we live there.

Then, there is Seattle. Because the Gulf of Alaska's cold waters don't warm up as quickly as the Gulf of Mexico's waters, the warming of the air in Seattle is delayed until mid-July, or later. June in Seattle is more often cool and gloomy than warm and sunny. Seattle residents expect June to offer only cold air, persistent low clouds, and more rain than they want.

The good news for Seattle is that the marine air from the Pacific moderates the temperature: rarely too high or too low. The bad news is the weather front competition out of Alaska, from the south Pacific, and occasionally down from Canada. Only in Seattle are there so many different names for the rain falling from the sky. The Indian tribes have 365 different names for the myriad versions of the rain fall, and not all of them start with the word shit.

Except for that one memorable Father's Day weekend the first year that I didn't go back home for the summer in between college school years. That year's May was warm, comfortable, and wet, all as per usual. Those of us who were forced to deal with June expected cold, windy, miserable, wet weather. What we were given was dry, hot air, no wind, and no clouds.

My father, a longtime resident of Seattle, assured me when I first moved to the Emerald City that residents expected rain to fall on a regular basis. When rain didn't fall, the residents would wring their hands, sacrifice a fallen evergreen over an open pit, and raise their arms to their rain god to make the cursed sun go away. His exaggeration made me laugh, and it wasn't far from the truth. But I digress.

Back in the Spring, when the local daffodils bloomed in huge numbers across acres and acres of green land, I registered to run the traditional 10km on the upcoming June Father's Day weekend, an annual race starting and finishing at Seward Park, along Lake Washington. I expected to see the usual running suspects racing, because the usual running suspects race, often. But no one is the spring thought the middle of June, in Seattle, would be oppressively hot.

Seattle is one of those places where the weather pattern changes not only daily, but often by the hour. Seattle weather is Topic Number One through Infinity for its residents. They are fascinated by the weather simply because the weather changes so often. This ain't your grandparents' San Diego. So, when summerlike warmth arrived on Wednesday, we all assumed it would be gone by race day Saturday, one of the few times that a running race on the Seattle running calendar was held on a Saturday, replaced by something more ominous. No such chance.

Lining up almost to the front, which was my usual spot in a large race, just behind the eventual leaders, but not too far back, I was perspiring, but not too much, despite my two-mile long warmup. I may have been only glistening, lightly, but the potential leaders were doing more than that. They were sweating. They were each sweating heavily. They were each sweating so heavily as to be sweating in buckets, together. They were wet. They were uncomfortable. The race hadn't yet started. The next 6.2 miles of their respective lives were going to be miserable.

My people are desert rats, people who lived comfortably in hot climates, spending significant time in hot environments, fond of dry heat and conditions. My mother comes from those people. She yearned for hot days, and being in the desert climate, actually moving to the desert a couple of times. My sister and I always wondered how we survived being in that hot weather, before coming to the realization we inherited hot-weather rattitus from her.

Ironically, mom wound up living a majority of her post-child raising life in the Great Northwest, where rain is a constant companion. In the land of Gore-Tex and umbrellas (that will be lost and for which there should simply be community umbrella stands, because no one there really knows where they last saw their own bumbershoot) she learned to flourish, always yearning for hot air.

The Northwest is where runners put newspaper in their running shoes following a run, allowing them to start their next run in dry shoes. Dry doesn't last long. Unlike dryer, warmer climes, up there runners layer up for a run, even into and out of summer. It is where ponchos are strewn about backseats and trunks of cars, because the rain is coming, from January 1 to December 31 of any given year. All that said, because of my own travels and permanent moves, I've come to realize that everyone just learns to deal with their weather. Those in Seattle just do it in the rain.

My desert rat heritage explained why I survived playing a doubleheader in 110-115 degree Northern California valley heat. My teammates suffered through each inning as if they were prisoners, their parents passing out in the shaded, stifling stands. I played centerfield, running down fly balls, sprinting around the bases, while all the other players acted as if they'd taken zombie juice. I don't exactly know what is in zombie juice, but it can't be good.

That same heritage and my upbringing in a very dry climate, explained why on this Father's Day, in this heat so uncommon to Seattle, I became the cream while the others turned into coffee dregs. After the race starter's sound, I settled into the back of the lead pack, with a plan to hang onto the position for as long as I could, which was usually halfway. My experience was not that I wasn't fast, I was simply not as fast as those leading the pack. But, I was there.

The lead pack of approximately 15 runners blazed through the first mile. I tugged along, feeling light on my feet. going through that split in the usual time, I relaxed, focusing on the race singlets just in front of me. I noticed each of those singlets were darker in color from the sweat drenching each singlet. Touching my own race shirt, I could feel dry cloth. I also heard sounds alien to the lead pack, sounds more appropriate for most of the runners well behind.

Heavy breathing. Well-trained distance runners have not only well-trained legs and well-trained running form, but they also have well-trained lungs. Those lungs gather in large quantities of air, runners moving that air fluidly through their system exhaling that air rapidly. That repeated exhale is usually nearly silent. Only towards the race's ending will that air outtake be heard. This morning was different and I noticed.

That heavy breathing brought the lead pack, me still in tow, through the second mile. Now shirts were sopping and dripping, breathing was heavy and labored, followed now by faltering form in those running just ahead of me. Me? I was jauntily bounding along, running on the balls of my feet, running cap affixed, feeling just fine, thanks for asking. Just past mile two, two members of our lead pack stepped to the side of the road, out of the race. Glancing as I passed by them, their expressions and body language spoke of their being spent. Well, I thought inwardly, it is hot.

Approaching the turnaround at the halfway point of the course along the glistening water of Lake Washington, a few others chose that point to also drop off the course, choosing to walk/jog their way back to the finish. This was the usual race location where I would be dropped by the leaders, forced to fend for myself over the second half with runners who were also spit out the back of the pack. Into the fourth mile, I realized I was still at the back of the lead pack, a much smaller lead pack.

There's a certain appreciation for the distance runner's mindset: those who use the discomfort of effort to achieve their running goal. They don't try; they just do. In fast runners, their discomfort is their fuel, seen in both their facial expressions and in the power of their running. They train for these race efforts. Only when the effort exceeds the ability do they adjust. This morning, on this day, even for the leaders, the effort exceeding their ability arrived early. A few more leaders fell off from the lead group or stopped altogether just after the fourth mile.

Me? I focused on the next runner just in front of me. I was keenly cognizant of what was happening and why. How long would he last? Not too much longer. Who would fall behind next? Several more. Is there anyone behind us catching up? In this heat? Are you kidding? Using the fifth mile in both maintaining pace and for the build into the final mile, realizing I was now an intimate part of the final lead few, I consciously slackened my jaw, brought my arms closer to my body with shorter arm swings, bounding with shorter, quicker strides. Let's see where this goes, I thought.

Ofttimes, respect is earned through sheer stubborn determination, compatriots noticing the indefatigable energy used to accomplish the task at hand. For me, this was one of those moments and in knew it. The running gods gave me the gift of a hot race. I cherished the gift. Did I mention there was no shade on this course, it being along the lakefront? There was no shade on this course. In that last mile, I hammered my way to the top three, a position I had never held in a race this size. Over that last mile, I ran by all but two who had been ahead of me. Sweet.

Runners who had never noticed me before today made a point of seeking me out to both congratulate me and ask how I survived. In thanking them, I repeatedly suggested that even a blind squirrel finds a nut, just as a runner in right conditions can make a statement, both for democracy and for heritage. No mention of the desert rat within me.