

## New Guy

I didn't know any of them, but I knew how to run. Besides that, I was tired of running solo. If I was in the mood to beat myself up and be miserable running alone, I thought I might as well join a running group and beat myself up and be miserable. Or not, after my showing up for their weekly midweek track workout, with only the leader of this particular running group even acknowledging my presence. I've been on both sides of this social herding dance.

I could tell the very serious runners who took their running seriously, with the full display of their importance to the group. They led with the humorous stories. They directed the warmup, soaking in the pre-workout tension we all felt was coming. Track workouts are intense, whether the workouts are solo or in a group. They assumed their well-earned places in the front. The others were also regulars to the weekly workouts, assuming their places behind the more aggressive ones. My being new to the group meant I hadn't located my place. I was alien to them.

Would I show up more than this first time? Would I complete the planned workout or merely take up space? Did I appear to be a social butterfly, looking for a place to land rather than a running space? I had just turned 49 years old. I'd been running fast enough to place in any road race I entered long enough to know where I fit. "I don't give a damn what you think of me," I thought to myself, "I'm here to run fast and hard." I then realized I was being self-defensive and took a slightly different stance. I approached the others individually and introduced myself. That effort didn't go as well as my running effort.

Three sets of three 400meter's with a 100meter jog, a full lap recovery after each third repeat. Each repeat lap was to be run at "fresh" pace or "fast" pace, so that not every repeat would exhaust us. That was the workout. I engaged and completed the workout, running in the top four or five on the fast repeats. Into my fourth decade of running, I knew the drill. No one spoke to me. this was the beginning of my learning the group theme.

Months later, after having shown up each week for the track workouts, and, each Saturday for the long runs, at least my presence was acknowledged. But not much else. I was barely invited to the post-run dinner after the track nights and merely

informed of the post-run brunch on Saturdays. While I enjoyed the brunch locations, I was not a fan of the chicken shack the group had chosen for its post-track efforts. In spite of my consistent presence, I felt the internal shame of being ignored. Given my actions in my adulthood, I had this groupthink attitude coming. Still, I simply wanted to run. I wanted to run fast, no matter the distance.

But I wasn't going to spend my money at that icky chicken shack with the horrid-tasting chicken and not much else to offer. So, one night, I went two doors down to the hamburger hotdog restaurant and made peace with my decision to dine solo after the weeknight workouts. The burgers were decent, the various hot dog iterations better. The sides were good enough and the beer selection was better. No one joined me for many consecutive weeks. Until they did.

The burger/hot dog place was generally quiet. Patrons usually picked up their food choices to go. I grew to sitting on the small patio on a nice evening, while choosing a corner in the small inside of the establishment. Just me. One night, after my food order was in front of me, the group's leader joined me. Jovially, I asked him why he came to this place. "The chicken shack's food sucks," was his response. We enjoyed our food and our conversation. The next week, a few more followed us to the hot dog place. Soon, bad chicken was out.

As we aged, our running priorities shifted away from group track workouts to Wednesday night trivia and Saturday morning longer runs. Adulthood will do that. Marriage. Career. Children. Injuries. Self-worth changes. Nothing ever stays the same unless you are Peter Pan. Of course, Peter Pan could fly and didn't age, so there is that.

The group became smaller, whittling down to just a few of us. While this made getting a table on Saturdays for the after-run breakfast with coffee easier, it is a change. Our now band of runners adjusted. We remain focused on twice-annual running trips to places we've not been, seeing sights we don't see at home, to run races we wish we had run when we were younger, faster. Those excursions are a part of the highlights of our years, which, invariably, I choose the location. I focus on the race, the training for the race, and the mental preparation for the race. Only then, after that preparation and focus, do I plan out the places shared with my friends in the revelry of sightseeing and dining.

There comes a point when you realize being a life-long runner has nestled into your DNA. Your willingness to get outside in the dead of winter over stepping onto a treadmill is a sign of your intense delight in being a runner. Your arising at o'dark-thirty just to run in oppressive early morning humidity to beat the day's even hotter deep summer weather onslaught shows you are committed to your running. Over your decades, it becomes more than running for accomplishment, though that goal you never overlook.

We are descended from those who lived before us, those who learned that long-distance movement on our feet, led to finding drinkable water, locating edible vegetation, as well as hunting of animals for food and skin covering. We can't outrun many animals, but we can travel longer, wearing down our prey, stubbornly searching for earth-grown sustenance. Our pedestrian abilities demonstrate that incentive is not the invention; it is necessity.

I imagine that long ago, one person in the hunting group put into practice the thought, "if we can trek for a long time in search of our needs, why can't we go faster than a walk, say, a trot?" Or, perhaps those who could run longer than the animal carnivore they had been hunting realized the need to speed. In any event, we can run long distance, and in fact, we can run longer than any other animals on the planet. We are not faster, mind you. Can't beat a cheetah in a race, but we can outlast it. Not that I'm willing to carry out that experiment. Self-preservation is important, too.

Way back when, if we didn't have a draft animal, we walked. If we didn't have leather under our feet, we walked barefoot, callusing against the little pebbles and the uneven surface. From that, we learned to run into the height of a hunt, or battle. Purposeful movement. Not real complicated. Much like the frustrated polar bear who has lifted the Eskimo's igloo so that his compatriot could grab the Eskimo, only to find that his compatriot failed to grasp the point of the task. We walk; we run.

Much like reading a good book, enjoying the movement in running takes time. We see our character unfold with each run, each passing year in running, and the acceptance in how our bodies change over the years, also shown in our running. The book we read offers insight into the characters, their motivation and reaction to the situation in which the author has placed them. We read the story because we are interested in both its substance and the writer's presentation. Our running leads us to not only

better physical endurance and body strength, but we also translate our many myriad runs into our own self-run outlook on our own passages.

I now run my easy runs so much slower than when I was so much younger, but it feels the same. My fast workouts are no longer fast, but they feel the same in intensity. My racing is no longer for the top of the podium as it is another adventure to be placed into my basket of experiences. No longer do I keep the race shirts, much less the trinkets I am awarded as a testament to my survival. Gotta admit, though, I do still enjoy the same race-day adrenalin, the feeling I have when I lace up my racing flats, and put on a race outfit. But, I digress.

Six days a week, I plan out a run in my head and then I do that run. Short, long, slow, fast, hilly, flat, makes no difference. I run. My day has movement. My body moves; my brain moves. My running aligns with the earth's rotation, never ending, always turning. My runs are not so much meditation as they are mine, all mine. I hear myself think, just as I hear the foot strike of my running shoes. And, sometimes, I am fortunate enough to run with others, likeminded in their running.

So, with all that in thought, today I ran with a completely different running group, because the tribe of which I am a member had each dispersed for this particular weekend. I don't know anyone in this new group. None spoke to me before or after the run; I was just that older fellow who ran several minutes a mile behind them for 11 miles. I dined alone for my post-run breakfast. No matter, it was a pleasant run and I wasn't alone. Nor was I last to finish.

Perhaps there will be future runs with the much larger running group. Maybe from those future runs I'll find others who reach out to socially engage, runners who would augment our tribe. Perhaps those good thoughts will not come true. Not that it matters. I see runners on my daily runs who are also running solo. I always expect that they have friends with whom they run on other days, just as I do. Like me, the vastness of their running is most likely done alone. We run for ourselves first.

Each day running for me is a new day in running. I can compare my day's result to similar runs, but I don't recall those as vividly as I do this run, on this day, until this day becomes yesterday. But, I have a mental quilt made of all of my runs, the myriad colors of memory reminding me that I am a runner. Now, about that cheetah.