

The Basic Loop

A condominium on the beach in San Diego, the condo located at the northern end of the oceanside part of town. From the condo, within the first few steps of a run, is an oceanside street stretching three miles, varied homes lining the flat stretch of lightly-traveled road. Run just feet from the flat beach, with an unimpeded view of the ocean. At its end, the oceanside street forces a short left turn into another left and onto the street parallel to the strand, leading to the straight shot to the start point of the run. A perfect run in perfect weather.

The opening pre-lefthand turn of the course not only gave an unimpeded view of the Pacific Ocean, amounting to free whale watching, big fish sightings, various sea vessel viewing, and visual beachcombing. The street was also quiet, almost devoid with traffic. The runner owns the road. Important when the runner's attention is fixed to the right, taking in all of the ocean's goings on. Cars were not parked on that street.

With each step further along the strand are eclectic homes almost touching one another, the closeness in proximity broken only by the numbered side streets that popped up every quarter mile or so. Different in style, color, size, many sans garages, each with postage-stamp front yards, varied in yard art, each also made certain to have an unobstructed view of the ocean. Large windows were gold.

Following the double-left turns onto the next street over from the beachside roadway is an equally as quiet street, the view now being of apartments, condos, small homes, palm trees, but no ocean. Just off the street, to the right, is a small drop off leading to an even smaller cut in the land, a semi-dry stream, becoming an angry river following a Southern California storm.

This return stretch is the secret to this run. In the quiet of the midday, the return being run on the solitude of the unassuming street, the run pace picks up, the acceleration subtle, the rhythm broken only by the small dips built into the road at every intersection to allow rainwater a path to the tree-lined small stream to the right. Unimpeded by traffic, the quiet street gives an ever so slight decline on the run back to the condo on the beach. Flat, fast, quiet, consistent footing, always with an ocean breeze, running the loop becomes a basic part of the runner's week. Running it becomes a no-brainer. It's your go-to running route.

Every runner has a basic loop; the route you never ever never wish you were not running on any given running day. Better than your favorite restaurant. Almost as entertaining as your favorite movie you watching for the gazillionth time. Not quite as fun as your current love interest . . . well, no, that's a bad comparison. The route is the fall back when the run has to be done and there is no time to drive to another run. It is your pie slice on a workday.

Perhaps the route has a long, gentle decline late into the run, during which you naturally pick up the pace without effort, carrying the fast run into the finish. Or, the route has a long uphill, with just enough steep – but not too much – requiring focused effort all the way to the hill's crest to a water fountain before the final segment to conclusion. Better yet, your favorite route takes you through neighborhoods adjoining one another, with quiet streets, visually-pleasing homes, lots of foliage, and no dogs along the way. Puppies are fine.

It's the route by which you measure your pace, your sustained speed, your endurance, your running joy. We all pick our daily running routes. They are equal on the running watch and on Strava or on paper. Yet, runs on your go to route is more equal than the others you run. That is the run you remember above all others. You don't take the time to tell anyone else, because well, they don't care, even when they say they do. And, these are other runners. This is the run, that when you die and someone comes across your running log or something like it, that will be noticed as your favorite run. Lot of good it will do you then.

Fortunate runners who reside in more than one area of the country garner more than one basic loop. That said, I have several friends who haven't moved in decades, and who have had the same such loop all that time. To my point, they each have found that route with the "it" factor for them. For each of them, they cannot verbalize a reason as to why they run their unique route, they just run it, endlessly. Action always speaks truth over words.

A small town square in a small town in Marin County, California, devoid of traffic or life on an early Sunday morning. Quietly, in the early morning, several cars begin taking up the public parking spots just across the road from the Post Office. Once the occupants from each vehicle have emerged, offered salutations to one another, making certain their shoes are tied before heading towards the reservoir just over a mile up the shaded side road to the watershed, the groupthink begins.

Into the County's watershed, the varied numerous trails lined with thick copse of evergreens and leaf-out tree groves, the long run comes down to loops around three distinct lakes, the run now on coastal dirt, soft to the touch, gentle on the limbs. Single file on the single-track dirt trail undulating up and down around the first lake, small in size, but impressive in view, all eyes looking for roots jutting from the path, each breath an inhale of fresh, dry California air.

Out of the small forest rimming the first lake and onto a main fire road line with oak trees, the route goes up and over a hill, the runners' feet churning the soft dirt road into dust. Cresting the hill leads to a series of long, winding, flat and wide trails taking the runners around a larger lake, the morning sunlight shimmering through the larger oak trees. No one thought to carry water bottles or nutrition. The air is sufficiently cooling and the pace sufficiently fast to avoid the need for water or sustenance.

From out of the shade, the run invades the sun on a long, long single-track around the largest lake, leading to a short stint on the only paved road the runners will see in the watershed, before jumping onto the single-track on the opposite side of the largest lake. At the end of that section, a lefthand turn heads the group onto the widest fire road, the fastest section of the watershed. Sufficiently warmed up following 90 minutes of running, the pace accelerating to the full potential of the runners, leading to a full go over the last mile on the quiet, shaded street back to the town square and a well-earned Sunday brunch. There are exceptions to the basic loop always being just long enough or just out your door.

The basic loop touches a runner's soul. There is no question that there will be a run that day. What to wear is determined by the day's weather. When to run determined from the events and obligations of the day. The run's pace determined from where is the runner in the training cycle. All that is out of the control of the runner. What remains daily is a decision over where to run. The why settles into the fabric of that decision. The route is what the runner controls. It's the route that brings you back.

A run is temporal. The memory fleeting. But there are exceptions to the short-term memory of a runner from the day's run, or of the previous day's run. Longer lasting running memories come from the pleasure of running a route befitting the uniqueness of that runner. Running isn't complicated. Neither is the joy from repeatedly running a route giving joy.

A regional park. An adjoining upscale neighborhood. Bike paths connecting the park to the neighborhood, each abundantly treelined, each with a stream moving beside the paths. A gentry run, complete with passive wildlife, stately homes, and devoid of traffic. A theme runs through a basic loop.

Six miles in length. The first 1.5 miles on the path in the regional park alongside the stream, passing through soccer fields before connecting onto a running path darkened by evergreens lining both sides of the path, stately homes adjoining the mile-long stretch with the route's only incline. One mile later, the route heads down the neighborhood's main street and onto a four-tenths of a mile path alongside another stream that is the cherry before the dessert of the run. The decline is gentle, the footing solid, the shaded portion tranquil and quick, emptying back to the soccer fields for the one-mile lead out to the finish, which being a two-mile gentle decline to the finish.

I can't run this route daily, or even weekly, but I do make time to run it as often as possible. The first mile along water, the second mile a constant gentle incline, the third mile down to varying degrees, the fourth mile a constant gentle incline, with the last two being a steady diet of fast turnover downhill. Each mile offering shade and varied nature. Each mile offering a doable challenge, unique from the others. The finish giving an uplifting conclusion to the run. The route is not so long or so short as to cheat me from the joy of running it.

And, it's a route I prefer to run solo. Running compatriots have their own ambitions and their own agendas. Each have their own basic loop. I am hunting miles. I run this route, testing my strength, my speed, and my potential race endurance. I get all of that for the price of focusing on just me. How quickly can I run the opening mile. How consistent am I able to carry the first mile through the second one. Am I able to accelerate through the dessert portion of the third mile, pulling that pace through the winding fourth mile to the apex of the course, before opening up with whatever energy remaining down the final two-mile stretch.

These are questions only I can answer. The answers are the memories I retain. I don't need to see the course; I have each turn, each stretch, in my head. I know the mile splits and the splits from within those miles. The run gives me return on my investment. That is why it is my basic loop.