

The Weather, Man

Perspiration dripping down my shins, into my ankle-high running socks, and into my shoes, a reminder of my early morning run. My toes felt squishy, so I wiggled them. They each felt wrinkled. From my toes wiggling around in the shoe to box in each shoe, the shoes squeaked. I felt wetter. But there was more.

The post-run soppiness was in my running shorts, from the waistline through the inner boxer brief and the outer short, gravity moving the sweat to the short bottom, dripping onto my thighs or onto the ground. Standing under a tall, stately shade tree, the warmth of the early morning oppressing me, the tree's shade shielding me from the sun, the constant dripping replaced any thought of drying out. But there was more.

The running shirt industry took decades to find the almost-perfect deep summertime running shirt, a shirt with perforation throughout the body of the shirt, the sleeves – short or long – of the shirt, unless the shirt was a singlet. The material is a blend of elements, including coffee grounds. All I know is that in extreme summer heat, the wetter the shirt, the cooler I remain throughout the run. This cooling effect makes the lightweight shirt darker in color from the sweat attaching itself to the fabric, but the shirt retains its lightness. A light moment from a morning of oppressive heat, humidity, real feel, and dew point.

The long run in the depth of summer starts and is completed while the morning sun is low on the horizon. A later start trashes your day and causes the effort to be worthless. The initial portion of the run seems doable because the sun has just awakened, the prior evening's warm air feels cool, and the run is fresh. All that good feeling lasts only for the opening few miles.

Once the sunglasses find their way off the running cap onto the face, the race is on to beat the sun in the early morning. There are no prizes for this long run in the summer morning heat. The results are intangible, water stops invaluable. With each passing mile, it is clear that the run will be accomplished, but equally clear that this is not the most pleasant running experience. The wetness has gone from seeping onto the clothing and into the shoes. The oppressive summer morning run is a lesson in silent determined discipline to not just complete the run, but doing so at the best pace for the day.

This oppressive heat is the reason summer road running races are 5-kilometers in distance. A runner so inclined can find a race longer in distance, but that race would be for bragging rights, showing how tough, strong, and determined are the racers choosing that long a race. That effort takes a different mindset. Most of us are disciplined, not masochistic.

Ideally, the race course would be flat, run in complete morning shade along a mature treelined river, out and back. Realistically, the course is run in complete sun, the heat beating off the pavement into the runners, with each turn leading to a short incline before a straight stretch into yet another incline.

Like the summer long run at dawn, the summer race is early. The opening mile is fast because the opening mile is always fast. The heat's effect comes into play in the middle mile; race adrenaline having evaporated into the morning's heat. Runners drop off in bunches. The runners who don't slow appear to be accelerating. They aren't. Just as the last miles of a marathon can be a death march, the 5k's last mile is a suffer fest to the finish for those succumbing to the heat. Summer may be better than the dead of winter, but it's still summer.

In a usual summer, there are 10 days that break from the oppressive effects of summer and running in it. Both the humidity and the dew point dramatically drop. The air taken in has an almost cool feel in the lungs. The day may even bring a light breeze cooling the face. The run is not a perspiration-collection opportunity. The steps on the run are light, the pace quicker without trying. The finishing mile feels as good as the opening one. The day is a gift, not to be easily dismissed. A day to test the increased plasma level that summer running brings.

On those days, you pick one of your favorite fast run courses, the one for which you know each mile split and each segment when you're running fast. Because you want to test yourself, you actually warm up before running the course. A self-propelled launch into the first mile leads into each subsequent mile holding pace, a pace that is so much quicker than any pace you've sustained the entire summer. Giggling in your head, you push the pace along the running route you know so well. And you push the pace again and again. Summer brings its own gifts.

For runners living on the West Coast, there are warm days and cool nights, relative to the rest of the Country. The air is dry. The air is dry. The air is dry. There is fog in June, warmth in July, and testing in August. A bit of discomfort on the run, whether it's done early morning or throughout the day, is meaningless to the task at hand. The running is fast. Concluding a run doesn't include run clothing sopped with moisture. Recovery comes quickly. Cotton is your friend.

Runners east of the Mississippi River have no such friends. The dew point rarely goes below 70, the humidity always seems to be above 90-percent, and the real feel leads to epitaphs emanating from the runner. Timing the run for the morning means suffering with the elements, absent a burning sun, the earliness of the run an ever-present barrier to actually getting in the run. Attempting the run for just after dusk means the day's heat remains, and the day's work and obligations are the potential barrier to that run. When is Labor Day, exactly?

In the winter months, in the cold, the deep freeze, the bitter, biting winds, runners are known to foolishly say aloud, "I wish summer was here." What they want is that sitting by the pool with an adult beverage feeling on their summers runs. Ain't happening. That desire is no different than the occasional longing for a prior relationship, forgetting there were reasons that you moved on. Winter has its own issues, not to be saved by the romantism of summer. Summer running is so overhyped and so less than ideal.

One summer day, in the depth of the summer's oppression, a Canadian front, pushed southwards by an exhausted jet stream letting its tummy drop down, arrived in town for a long weekend, with money to spend, and a place to stay, the same weekend that the annual 10km was set to be run. Temperatures dropped into the low 70's for a high, the nights were coolish in the low 60's. The dew point went to 60 and stayed there; the humidity toyed with being in only the upper 60's. Everyone breathed in deeply of the cool air.

A midsummer's 6.2-mile race is not my cup of tea. At least, not until the cold front moved in. It moved in on Thursday, a tempo training day for me. Running my favorite 4-mile loop, I ran fast, easy, and in complete glide mode, finishing in a time I normally would do in a race. Quickly checking the weekend forecast, I saw more of the same was hanging around through Monday. I registered for that 10km to be run Sunday, a race I'd never even considered running.

The course is flat, with long stretches through and back a couple of large parks, the last mile a long, winding blur of office buildings, churches, and Victorian mansions. It's fast. The race is sufficiently old to attract thousands of runners each year, despite the usual oppressive heat. Because of that heat, the race starts just 30 minutes after the sun dawns.

The only plan I had was to run fast. I had no visions of grandeur or of placing. Racing at its base position is fast running for the ability you have at the moment. Running is simply how fast can you run from Point A out and then back to Point A. shoes, socks, shorts, shirt. The rest is unnecessary. This race gave me a rare opportunity to gauge my ability in the middle of a hot summer. This one year, the weather was a gift.

I managed to get into the first wave, the fast wave, Wave A. I found a suitable start position almost to the back of the first wave, well behind the elites, the sub-elites, the wanna be sub-elites, the faster ones, and just ahead of those runners who had no business being in that first wave. Within the first few steps following the starter's gun being fired, I knew this day was not like any other summer day. I felt light and fast, under control, and into the race.

Not until I glided easily through the opening mile and halfway into the second mile did I notice running-induced perspiration on my race singlet. Easing through a long curve into the first park, I felt my body slide into my race groove. Holding back to the halfway banner (seems only large races have midrace banners), I began reeling in front runners in packs rather than individually. The air felt nonexistent, my arms and legs felt dry.

Rather than being beaten down in the first half of the race from hot, wet, oppressive weather, in the fourth mile I had the energy to push the pace faster. I did. I realized more runners were finding themselves behind me. I began picking off the wannabe's and some sub-elites, all of whom didn't have their race legs on this day. I certainly did. My final mile was a blur of the colors I passed and my quickening foot strikes; the finish line roars in the distance. The next Tuesday was a run on the usual miserably hot and humid day. But not this day. I finished dry and high.