

Preview

Looking back, I knew in seventh grade that I had the distance running gene. I didn't know, exactly, but I knew that running longer than a sprint was better than walking for the same longer distance than that sprint. I also learned something about relationships, but that perspective is for a different time. What I did at 13 certainly impacted my becoming a distance runner in college. We learn more about ourselves long after a life-changing event, we simply don't realize what we learned from what changed in the moment. True that.

Early on during the walkathon for some charitable cause, I saw high schoolers, college-aged runners, and still older runners, begin to pass our junior high school group. A warm day, I was in shorts, a colored t-shirt, and the shoes I owned, which were the athletic shoes of the time, which I wore for any sport I played, at school, church, dining out, and at the pool. Seeing the train of runners run by us, I felt an internal tug to go with them. I never before thought to run further than once around the school track or from first to home.

Turning to the girl I liked who was also in our large walking group, I said to her that I was going to follow the runners and I'd see her at the end of the walkathon. Ignoring her unhappy expression, I began slow running, mimicking the runners who had just passed us. Only, their pace wasn't slow; their pace was only slower than sprinting. Not the same thing. Catching up to them required all of my unknown ability to run without stopping.

Almost out of breath, I discovered that running with them was easy. Running with a sprinter's stride, barely tapping my toes onto the road, my arms reaching out in gathering air, I settled in with the group. From my watching these runners over the next few miles, I copied their strides off the balls of their feet and not their toes. I relaxed my shoulders just as they seemed to have done. The further I ran in their presence, the easier running felt. Not realizing the physical part of me relaxing led to the mental side of me softly focusing on the feeling from the running itself. A runner's high is a real thing. Didn't catch up with the girl that day.

Team sports participation stepped in between myself and more distance running, though in my high school summers, I would run laps at the local university track in the early morning before my summer job de jour: a slow warm up lap, a faster warm

up lap, a full lap of crisscrossing my legs with the aid of my hips, a full lap backwards, finishing with a couple of laps with fast curves and steady straights. In the winter, I ran up and down the basketball court without stopping, both in practices and in games. In the spring, I would run the team laps around the ballfield. More accurately, I ran fast enough to catch and lap the slower teammates before the last lap. One time, following a practice, I ran them fast enough to be noticed by the high school middle distance runners on their cooldown from practice.

That day was during team tryouts determined by the baseball coach, who had tasked me to direct three days of practices while he stepped away for administrative reasons related to teaching. So, I did, with most of those returning players and the new ones willing to simply do their job. Two seniors trying out, who each had ability, brought their juvenile attitude with them, interrupting the practices, which always ended with the three laps around the ballfield. There were words, attitude, testosterone run amuck. I ran those long laps hard. I learned that day that I could run angry. The two didn't make the team.

People each react to a friend's unexpected death in ways unique to them. For me, during my freshman year in college, upon learning of a high school friend a year older than me having suddenly passing away, my reaction was to go for a run into my neighborhood, running as fast as I could for as long as I could. Death of another is hard enough for anyone who knew the deceased. Death of a young friend is more than a challenge to the young, surviving friend. There is no comprehension as to why. Acceptance of death is barely understood. All I knew was that he was not going to answer my calls.

I didn't stop for three miles. My feet pounded the asphalt roads. My heart pounded inside of me. It hurt to breath that hard for that long. I was only slightly certain of where I was and more importantly, how I got there. Having stopped, I consciously knew life had changed. Exhausted, having maxed out my ability for that day, I turned and walked slowly back. My walk was a long one. I found my way back. I showered. I forced down food. I could breathe and would see the rest of this day. Nothing is promised, so I promise myself this moment on this day.

More occasions than I choose to remember, I have raced my best intent on making the podium, before reaching for the age division award. I would achieve that racing goal . . . rarely, seemingly gaining fourth place was my destiny. The consistent result

was not a deterrent. 5kms and shorter. 5-milers and 8km. 10kms. 12kms to half marathons. Hill climbs. Descent racing. Trail races, but not ultra marathons. Awesome overnight relay racing with a great group of running friends. And yes, marathons. All would cause me the “chasing windmills” effect, much the same as pounding my head against a wall without result.

I am willing to take a pop quiz in class, an end of the semester exam ending the course, or a piece of complicated litigation, that’s me. I’m that guy. I’m no different in my mind set for racing. Races are quizzes for where I am at in my training. They are tests following a longer build of endurance and strength. Succeeding to my expectations in a race means I’ve put the puzzle together. I never met a race I chose to run that I didn’t like. I rarely found a race that I wanted to enter to disappoint me. Otherwise, why run them. Each road race course comes with its own quirks, some with more than others. Should the quirks be fun to run, I’ll come back. when the uniqueness is unpleasant, at least I know why.

On a cold morning in mid-February, standing amidst a thousand runners in the sub-freezing temperature accompanied by an incessant north wind biting into my winter running attire, light rain pelting at me, I waited for the starter’s bong to get the 15km moving. I was 62. I’m a veteran of racing in the elements any time of year. I knew this was going to be a long, arduous endeavor, but at least I wasn’t alone.

This was my first race attempt following my first few months with physical therapy to regain my balance when standing, walking, or running. throughout the PT I kept running because I’m a runner which means I’m stubborn. I developed more issues than I resolved, but that’s for another day. I could run so I did. I’d heard and read about this race, so there I was, uncomfortable at the start line. The race start gong sounded. We were away.

Tightly packed through the first mile, more time than I wanted was taken with avoiding being tripped, keeping a straight line, not flailing over myself, and moving forward to the first mile marker as rapidly as I could. Making the first mile marker, I’d found my race groove, my watch beeping my mile split matching the marker. That was the last good mile of the just over 9.3-mile race.

Anyone racing can accomplish their goal in the opening mile ‘cuz it’s the first mile. The second mile took us up two long hills, with two steep short downhills, the biting

wind cutting my face. I bobbed and fretted about falling, a bit peeved over the hilliness. The course would get worse. The third mile was run over a long, long incline, a straight shot. Did I mention a long, long mile-long incline was into the biting wind, all the while the rain pouncing upon us? It got better.

Mile four was a bit of a respite, taking us around a major park, the biting wind calmed just enough from the groves of trees, the rain continuing in pelting us, and the course was flat. I knew that meant we'd hit the high point of the course and would head back. The fifth continuing mile up into the biting wind, with the rain pelting us, gave me the memo that we were not done with hills. The runners were now strung out, the leaders unseen, the fastest of the next string of runners just within my sights. We'd reached that stage of the race wherein we'd all found our runners to mark for the race's duration.

Mile six was a long, long straight on a long, long thoroughfare. The biting wind remained, accompanied by the pelting rain, race fatigue now joining them. When racing fatigue sets in, the remainder of the distance testing your endurance strength gained from your daily running over each week. Pleasantly, my face locked into a permanent grimace in racing in the elements, I had the strength to pull through my fatigue, without any aid from the course or the morning's weather. Mile seven took us back whence we came, gently down, the biting wind to our backs, the pelting rain's effect lessened. I passed a few more runners, more than few, actually.

Mile eight repeated the second mile, only in reverse, with two long downhills and two short uphill's. I passed more on the ups and maintained on the downs. The last mile was a blur of furious racing, passing others, and pouring myself into to finish. I finished. There would be no cooldown or post-race celebration. Checking the results, I placed high up enough to be on the podium in my age group. Nice. It was time to go home.

That race was my last good one. I know that now. But I have this gene I mentioned. And, I have a curiosity in racing. So, I find the right moment to run the right race, just to see why others run that race course. I've become that old guy starting behind you who passes you gently during the race, finishing well in front of you. I hated that guy when I was younger. Now, I look to the race feeling while I race. I'll keep racing, running to my rhythm, enjoying the effort. I promise that much to myself.