

Running Time

Luke Rolfes

Richard and the rest of my department wanted to run a 5K race, which I hadn't attempted since high school. I said, yeah, I'd run it. No big deal. It might be fun to race again—see if these old legs still had salt in them. I wouldn't admit I was taking it seriously, though I did a couple training runs that left me mushing my knees with white knuckles and gasping for air between my thighs. A few years ago I was a real runner, and I thought maybe, just maybe, I'd win one for old times' sake.

The road race was a steep five kilometers on a cold September morning. The course opened with a straight-shot mile that continued to rise and rise before finally veering left and falling toward the river. I lined up near the front, trying to appear nonchalant, experienced, and poised—a seasoned veteran stretching his hams in the company of rookies. I'd done this before, after all. This wasn't my first rodeo. When the gun sounded I took off like a bat out of hell. By the time I hit the sharp part of the incline, my wings were brick-tight with tension, and I was starting to doubt the feasibility of my master plan. Holy shit, this hurts, I thought. I never remembered it hurting so badly. As I crested the hill, I considered dropping out, maybe giving up running for the rest of my life, but my legs recovered with the plunging, downhill relief. Hypoxia lifted, and I re-established my bearings. I saw a runner to my left. There was a runner fifteen yards in front of me. Everybody else was behind.

The nice part about running, I'm speculating, is its ubiquity. All across the world, men and women are lacing up their running shoes and hitting the bike trail, gravel road, treadmill, or sidewalk. Some of these runners approach workouts with life or death gravitas. Some are simply out there for fresh air, exercise, or to look better naked. They plug their consciousness into iPods. They smear petroleum jelly over their nipples, wrap themselves in sweat-rendering trash bags, and go to the bathroom down their legs on race day. All of us, regardless of speed, competitiveness, or circumstance, are trying to accomplish the same thing: get from point A to point B as fast as we comfortably can.

A certain race will illustrate exactly how much you suck as a runner. The world is full of better athletes. Men and women with superior genes train harder and want it more badly than you do. Look how slow you are, the race

says. Look how far away you are from competitive.

The race I was running that day with my department did the opposite. It reanimated me.

I glanced at the guy on my left, then fixed my attention on the back of the lead runner. I figured: This race is just getting started, boys. A big, bad sleeping dragon is opening his eyes, and he's saying "I think I'll go ahead and win this son-of-a-bitch."

I finished third.

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Maybe I'm a purist. I don't believe in much when it comes to running: training programs, for one. I don't buy into heart rate monitors you strap to the chest, achieving a true anaerobic pulse, GPS controlled pedometers, or fancy shorts. Running, to me, is about controlling your body. Get out on the trail, I say. Be with nature. Be with the birds. If you are a runner, don't be proud of your running accomplishments on Facebook. Disappoint yourself. Self-deprecate. Let your feet make it up to you.

Richard, my running buddy of

today, wants to run as fast as me, and I want to be faster than myself. If I achieve my goal and he achieves his, we'll slobber over a faster runner still. There are men and women who can run five kilometers in less than fifteen minutes. Apex predators. Gods.

"Richard! You are so freaking fast," I tell him. I'm gushing, but I can't believe how fast he's become in just a few short months, how passably athletic he looks in his running gear. If a stranger saw him on the street, that stranger would say, "That guy looks athletic," and maybe the façade of fitness is what we're really after. We want to look like runners, talk like runners, pass as real-life competitive runners. Getting up higher on the food chain is simply a perk.

"You're such a legitimate running man," I say.

"No, you're legitimate," Richard says.

"I think we're both legitimate."

"We really are."

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My running peak likely occurred when I was seventeen years old. As an All-Conference runner in high school, I was a force to be reckoned with, though there wasn't a lot going on between the ears. I weighed 140 pounds, and I could scamper across cross-country courses like a young, stupid deer. I won medals in

a slinky, black-and-red uniform. I performed calisthenics, speed workouts, and yoga stretches. For one brief moment during the initial cross-country time-trial of my senior year, I was the fastest guy in school. Coach read the time when I jogged across the finish line, fifty yards in front of the next competitor. You did it, I thought, but I didn't realize what I'd accomplished. This was the only competitive race I'd ever win in my life.

Seventeen-year-old me didn't celebrate the pinnacle of his running career. Instead, I had girls on the brain. My mind was cycling a 24/7 commentary on the prospects of my dating life. Do you think Christine will like my long sleeve shirt with stripes down the arms? What about these khakis? Do you think she'll ask me if I had an okay weekend? Do you think she'll want to know if I am going to be at Friday's football game, and if I think she should wear her soft, red sweatshirt that rises above her hips when she lifts her arms?

More important questions never asked: Why didn't I stand at the finish line like some sort of man-eating shark and watch all the slower fish limp home? Why didn't I climb to the roof of the gymnasium and yell "Stop harvesting my fields, peasants. Look to the sky and bask upon the face of your new king"?

I didn't do anything to mark the occasion. Instead, I laced my fingers behind my sweaty head, attempted to slow my breath, and fantasized that somewhere in the distance of the school parking lot Christine was staring at the road leading to Alleman Estates, trying to figure out which shadow of a runner was me.

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Running is rarely fun. Shit happens to runners. They even get eaten by bears sometimes. Battling through a hard stretch is an integral test of one's running fortitude. Or maybe it shows how irrational we are. My dad picked me up in Cottonwood Overpass at the end of my first twenty mile run—a major feat in a young marathon trainer's life. It was a humid 85 degrees. I was on antibiotics at the time, for a nasty case of poison ivy, and I didn't drink water for the first twelve miles. Ninety minutes passed without incident, but I had no idea what was waiting for me in the two sections of course I'd never run before, Cherry Glen Park and Red Feather Prairie. Don't be fooled by the idyllic names: calf-burning climbs, shin-breaking grades, gnats everywhere. A more hyperbolic runner might say you could see the bodies of joggers littering the undergrowth like the bodies of mountaineers frozen above Mount Everest's 8000 meter kill-line. Exaggerations like this are likely due to dehydration, but, in all seriousness, I wouldn't be surprised to see a dead runner up there.

Somehow I made it to the end. I descended Saylorville Dam, every fiber in

my body telling me to just give up and lose consciousness.

Dad, I thought. Where are you, Daddy? It's your boy coming to you.

I don't really remember the last 100 yards, but I might have tried to hug my dad when I found him, maybe I told him how happy I was that he had conceived me. I don't recall him being a good sport. He made me ride in the pickup truck bed because I was too sweaty and he was afraid I'd throw up all over his upholstery. What do you think I am, I asked. Cargo? Livestock?

I've been through hard runs before, but nothing as physically and mentally draining as that first twenty miler. On more than one occasion a thunderstorm cornered me miles from my apartment. Even though you know your socks are going to turn to sponges, your nipples to wood, and your shirt to sandpaper, what other choice do you have but to jog through it? I've sprinted desperately to many a bathroom. I've stumbled and bitched my way through temps as low as 0 degrees and as high as 100. I've run through snow, sleet, rain, ice, lightning, wind, sun, humidity, and little pebbles of hail. I've never once thought of it as a character building experience, never looked in the mirror and said what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

I didn't sign up for running in extreme circumstances, but I do it anyway because that day is a running day, and you know what we do on running days.

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I can't recall if my ex-girlfriend Angie, a serious track girl, said the words, "Luke, you are now fat and slow," but in my mind those words existed, somewhere in the transcript of our relationship.

This conversation likely happened during an eighteen-month stretch when my running interest waned and my waistline waxed. Each day I became a little slower, heavier, and more resistant, but it only seemed to make Angie stronger. She would humiliate me on the bike trail behind her house. Every time I huffed alongside she increased speed. Needles found the meat between my ribs. Her heels laughed in my face. I felt like I was breathing through a bendy straw. You're a mean girl, I thought. I never did this to you when I was faster. I never disrespected your speed and limitations.

One day, when I could no longer stand the thought of chasing her, I said, forget this, and up the hill she went like a locomotive shedding its tender and steaming towards the brightness of the open prairie. I slowed to a walk in the forest by the old iron bridge. Jogging at my own pace for a while sounded okay, maybe doing some stretching. Alone, the bike trail was shockingly quiet. I strolled for a while. I threw a couple rocks down the ravine and sat on a bench.

I knew, at some point, Angie would come down the hill red-faced and angry. She was always upset when I didn't try hard enough, or when she thought I wasn't living up to my potential. With my fitness hiatus in full force, I had no internal drive that demanded sweat, kilometers, and a sub-seven-minute-mile-or-die pace. I only had Angie's voice.

I looked up to see a figure standing statuesque at the top of the hill. Angie had her arms raised, palms up, as if it were the biggest surprise in the world I hadn't followed her. The expression on her face seemed to say, what is your problem? Are you actually that weak? Are you seriously letting me go that easily?

Running is my thing, damn it, I wanted to scream at her. You aren't allowed to take it. It's mine.

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My only full marathon was ten years ago. I remember the race like it was yesterday, my running buddy Omar and I matching each other stride for stride through the streets of Des Moines, spending four hours jogging together on a sunny October day. It was probably the only marathon I will run, and I had a lifelong friend there next to me. That made me nostalgic toward the experience, I suppose. Omar had a much worse time.

The build-up to a marathon is mercurial and time-consuming. You moonlight as a runner for no pay, and you don't experience as much self-actualization as you'd think—not unless you are the guy who finished immediately behind us. When he crossed the line, he raised his forearms in the air (that was all he could lift) and roared like a stubby-armed Tyrannosaurus over a slain Triceratops.

"What are you doing to us?" Omar asked as the race volunteers wrapped him in a tin-foil blanket. My poor friend was drastically under-trained for the race, but he had run it anyway, even though he had lost coherence in the last three miles. His muscles were oxygen starved; his brain was punch-drunk. He wanted to know: Why had we stopped running? I told him to stay covered up and drink more Gatorade. He needed electrolytes. Electrolytes were the essence of his life, I said. Tyrannosaurus refused a foil blanket.

I had hoped for some revelation or spiritual vision there in the runway at the marathon's end, but nothing came to mind. I felt a little foggy, but I wasn't that tired. Omar and I hadn't transformed into real men or tough men or total badasses. We and the finishers were just kind of milling around like a bunch of third graders with the stomach flu waiting to be seen by the nurse. I found myself thinking I didn't belong here. This wasn't much fun. After shorter races you could yuk it up and eat a bunch of good food, maybe some bacon. After the

marathon, your mom was supposed to lead you to the car, and you were supposed to go home and be sore for the rest of the day, probably the next day, too.

“Why is that guy crying?” Omar asked, pointing to Tyrannosaurus, who knelt by himself on the pavement.

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Richard has a wife named Kori. Like me, she’s a veteran runner who has, as have we all at some point, been eclipsed in motivation by someone she cares about. It’s Richard. I won’t sugarcoat his deeds. Kori’s husband has stepped on a trip wire inside her turf, and the alarms going off confuse him. He can’t understand why she doesn’t explode with pride when he signs up for his first half marathon. Her reaction makes sense to me, but I’m the accomplice. I’m the one with the priors. I know the feeling of having your thunder stolen, and that makes my fanning of Richard’s flames indefensible.

“Dude, we are getting so freaking fast,” I tell him in the hallway outside his office. Kori walks by, and she wrinkles her nose at the sight of us—two thirty-year-old boys discussing how much ass our tree fort is going to kick when we finish building it into the mother of all tree forts. Tree-fort Knox. The ironwood version of Helm’s Deep. Schloss Neuschwanstein von Tree.

“Children,” she mutters.

I understand all too well what’s at stake. She knows it won’t be long before her husband surpasses her, and he is suddenly a better runner than she. Suddenly he cares more. Suddenly it’s his thing, too, and then maybe it’s no longer her thing as much as it is his. That’s the worst part. It doesn’t matter if he beats her in one particular race, a week, a month, or the rest of her life. His intrusion will eat at her in the same way it ate at me to watch Angie conquer the sport that was once my vital spark. They’re taking a part of us that we thought was unique and special—a part of our personal definition—and now they are using it to define themselves.

It’s downright plagiarism.

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Though I’m somewhat to blame, my heart goes out to Kori. I hurt for all the runners who have ever gotten beat because I know how they feel. As great as it is to best another person in a footrace, it’s worse to lose—and even my proudest moments as a runner have come in defeat: second place in the Madrid Labor Day Two Mile, seventh place in the Raccoon River Conference Championship, third place in the Pony Express 10K, four-hundred-and-thirty-first place in the

Des Moines Marathon. You feel good about yourself for five seconds, then you get in a faster race, or you run a crappy time, or you eat too much pizza and find yourself staring back at some fatty in the mirror who can no longer make you proud by getting from point A to point B.

The passion goes away so much quicker than it returns. All of us pretend the hunger will stay forever, but we know it won't. We ride this wave until the water dissipates. Me, Richard, Kori, Omar, even Angie. We're constantly wary of our fitness. We step on the slow ones because they make us feel faster. We pet each other's egos and talk about times, and shoes, and pace. We keep running until we can no longer stand the thought of putting one foot in front of the next. That's what we do because, at this specific moment, we're caught.

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