

The Running Life: Better in the Long Run

Swapping speed for stamina can be sweet indeed

By Candace Karu

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OK, I lied. Or maybe I didn't lie exactly; maybe I just deluded myself. Last year I wrote a column extolling the virtues of training for shorter races. Resolving to make the most of resources limited by injury, I devoted myself to training smarter on fewer miles, distilling my runs into workouts that would serve pace over distance. I commenced on a program of speed work, hill work, and tempo runs, adopting a whole new approach to my running.

At the same time, I began to reconsider my approach to injury as well. The first time I wrote about problems I was having with low back pain, I received a raft of sympathetic emails commiserating, commenting and diagnosing my injury from afar. Several of those emails pointed out that many doctors and researchers believe a majority of patients suffering from back pain are dealing with psychological issues as well as physical problems. More and more health care professionals are coming around to the concept of a mind-body connection as it relates to maladies of the spine. It was time for me to ask if all my back problems were in my head.

So, while I was trying to embrace my unfamiliar, structured training regimen I also embarked on a quest to cure what had been ailing me and deal holistically with my recalcitrant back. In addition to regular massage and therapy sessions, I carved out more hours each week for sleep. I used to brag to training partners about my ability to get by on five or six hours a night, equating sleeplessness with virtue and stamina. It's possible that the culmination of years of inadequate rest may well have been a significant component of my problem.

The result of my work, if not miraculous, was certainly noticeable. Catching my reflection in a shop window one summer day, I saw that my posture would have made the nuns responsible for my elementary education proud, standing as straight and tall as my 61.5 inches would allow. I found that in sleeping more, I was sleeping better, with fewer hours in the dead of night spent tossing in wakeful frustration. Even bending down to tie my running shoes in the morning, my personal daily litmus test for back pain, had become almost effortless.

Effortless and unnoticeable, too, was the way the miles crept back into my training. Longer runs seemed a natural progression and a blessed relief. It occurred to me that while I was completely sincere about my desire to get faster at shorter distances, it was always second-best for me, something I did to keep running if I couldn't sustain higher mileage. It never fed my body and soul the way training for longer distances could. It never felt authentic.

Sometime over the summer, rested and stronger than I had been in years, I reverted to my former, long-distance self. I jettisoned any plans I may have had to succeed as a 5K runner. And yet telling anyone, or even admitting to myself that I was thinking about running a marathon was out of the question. I simply tagged along with a group that was training for different races in October and November. Fearing that a declaration of my intentions would jinx the effort, I refused to think about a specific race. Like a recovering addict, I was taking the effort one day at a time.

It was after an 18-mile run that I let myself get conditionally excited. In the seven years since my last marathon, a PR by almost 8 minutes, time and circumstance had eroded many of the weapons in my running arsenal. I felt, once again, like a marathon virgin, with a dangerously low mileage base and no real speed to speak of. But what I lacked in preparation, I made up for in almost giddy enthusiasm. I loved this training, the sustained effort of runs measured not in minutes but hours, and the almost-like-falling-in-love closeness that occurs after endless miles of running week after week with people who share your dreams.

I registered for the Green Mountain Marathon in South Hero, Vt., a few weeks before the race. In spite of the moniker, there are no mountains involved, just an out-and-back course with long, rolling hills in the first and last miles of the race. The rest of the route, much of which is run on flat dirt roads, winds through farms and orchards around the shores of Lake Champlain at the peak of fall foliage. With few participants and fewer frills, Green Mountain was my idea of marathon heaven.

Clarence Demar, seven-time Boston Marathon winner and former South Hero resident, couldn't have picked a better day to race, with fall teetering on the knife-edge of winter. This wasn't New York or Boston or Chicago, this was rural New England at its most inviting, with a low-key charm only very small races can provide. Fewer than 300 runners ambled to the start minutes before we set off, encouraged by restrained encouragement from dozens of onlookers. By mile 5 we had formed a sinuous line stretching out along the lakefront. Windblown clouds skittered across a gray sky. In the absence of spectators, trees waved their party-colored leaves at runners along the course.

My marathon comeback wasn't pretty. It was slow, dogged and very, very hard. But even before I crossed the finish line, I was planning the next race, mentally cataloging the changes I would make in my training. I drove home secure in the knowledge that this distance I love so much would forever be a part of my running life.

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