

The Running Life: Falling in Love Again

A Return to Racing

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Recently, I have become involved with an old love. At first I said nothing to my friends or family, wanting to keep this thrilling experience to myself, away from pointed questions and prying eyes. Because my last experience with this love ended badly, I was tentative and unsure of how to proceed.

But it took almost no time before I was once again in the thrall of a consuming passion, devoting stolen hours and precious energy to the relationship. Early mornings were spent preparing for my beloved, hours carved out of the ordinary activities of my daily life. Like other women who find love unexpectedly, I began to eat less and lose weight with no real effort. I was besotted. Instead of watching TV or meeting friends for coffee, I would go to bed early, thinking only of my love, waiting to dream about how it would be when we were together.

Along with the reveries of being with my love, there were performance anxiety dreams, much like the ones I would have in college during exams; dreams in which I would show up for a test woefully unprepared, or worse, naked. Dreaming of this love proved that, in spite of the thrill, I was ambivalent about my situation. Yes, this was exciting, but would it end badly yet another time?

Only time will tell, but until then I will revel in the excitement that my love brings me. There is nothing that can compare to the absolute joy of racing; the new and old love of my life.

When injury reduced my running to a handful of miles a week, racing was one of the things I missed most. Thinking that I could participate even if I couldn't run, I signed up to work at a few races, hoping that volunteering would put me back in the mix. To say this tack didn't work is a laughable understatement. With every volunteer assignment, my feelings of race envy deepened. At the registration table I would smile cheerily, wishing everyone a great race, while inside my heart was breaking.

And working the finish line? A total misery. Seeing the triumphant, sweat-soaked runners as they reached the end of their effort underscored my loss. It was easier for me to sweep up cups at water stations long after everyone had watched the awards ceremonies and gone home than it was to put myself in the middle of a throng of racing runners. I resented all the people I had so wholeheartedly and unreservedly embraced during my racing years. Why were they allowed to enjoy what I so desperately missed? Why should they have a great race when I could have no race at all? I was selfish and petty and not a little bit cranky, a child deprived of her favorite toy.

All that is changing. My renewed fitness and freedom from injury has allowed me to slowly, carefully reenter the world of racing. My journey back began on the Fourth of July. It had been three years since I had last run the L.L. Bean 10K, a race that, in better times, I ran every year. This particular event has always been a favorite of mine, the perfect mixture of small town charm and rigorous competition. Five hundred people, most of them from surrounding towns in Maine, gather in the tiny public park in Freeport. Is there a better way to start the Independence Day celebration than to run hard with a bunch of your friends for six miles, then eat blueberry muffins and watermelon in the shade of an oak tree? I honestly don't believe there is.

It felt good gathering at the start, nervous in a way that is unique to racing. It felt good going out a little too fast on the downhill first mile, good struggling up the many hills, good breathing raggedly and willing myself to relax and settle into a pace, good pushing hard the last half mile, the sun heating the pavement and burning the back of my neck, feeling like the finish line would never appear. It felt incredible having my name announced as I approached the chute and hearing that much longed for sound of my chip chirping as I crossed the orange mat. Like love, this is a feeling difficult to describe and impossible to capture any other way.

Since that return foray to Freeport, I have become a racer possessed. Well, OK, if not exactly possessed, I'm decidedly smitten. I've raced several times since then, with each outing building my confidence and my desire. Last week I made the ultimate commitment, signing up for a fall marathon.

Given my devotion to racing, it may sound like I have a particular skill or talent for this pursuit. Au contraire, mon ami. On my best day, I run proudly in the middle of the pack. Aging and abuse have taken their toll, and I will never again be considered fast. While I can admire and appreciate the talents of elite runners, the benefits I derive from racing are very different from the people who will take home the hardware.

Racing allows me to test myself. It is a true measure of my fitness and strength, both physical and mental. Racing allows me to set goals and structure a plan to achieve them. It gives my daily training a context and purpose that I missed when it was absent from my life. Racing helps me periodize my training and keeps my efforts fresh. Gearing up for spring and fall races focuses my workouts.

And let's face it, for those of us who are in no danger of finishing first, or 10th, or even 25th, racing can be fun. Gathering with a group of like-minded runners, testing limits, and pursuing goals feels to me like a true celebration of the running life.

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