

The Running Life: Life During Runtime

This ain't no foolin' around

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no. no. no. It's too early. It can't be time to get up yet. Opening one eye to look at the nightstand confirms what I know to be true. I reach out to silence the insistent ringing of the alarm clock and feel the urge to draw the blinds and fall back into the warm cocoon of blankets and pillows. Outside the emerging day is chilly and damp, shrouded in a veil of fog, dark and uninviting. The house, and more specifically my bed, is dry and snug, the perfect place to be at 5 a.m. The idea of staying in bed is inviting, but in the end a stronger will prevails. I have work to do.

I remind myself that this run is a block, a small but important piece of a base I am building, though rebuilding might describe it more accurately. The process is comforting in its familiarity; I have done this work before. If the races I committed to months ago are going to bring me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, then I know this base must be seamless, without holes or bumps and carefully constructed, one block at a time. The base does not recognize fatigue, inclement weather, internal malaise, or sloth; the base wants no excuses. The base demands to be built, strong and true, stretching from the first footfall to the finish line.

I push out of my bed into the clothes I have set out the night before and brush my teeth while my tea steeps, hot and fragrant. As with most days, I drink half the cup, knowing the cooled tea will be even better when I return. Poured over ice, it is the perfect antidote for a post-run thirst. Before the sheets have lost the heat of my sleeping body, I am out the door.

There are patches of fog and a cold breeze off the ocean that makes warming up a slow process. The milky glow of the moon shows through skittering clouds. Any stars have long since disappeared and I set out into a fading darkness and the gray beginnings of a new day. I jog the three-tenths of a mile, gently uphill, to the end of the driveway, my breath coming in cloudy bursts as muscles acclimate to motion. By the time I get to the main road, I am ready to run.

"This ain't no party, this ain't no disco, this ain't no foolin' around." Life During Wartime, the old Talking Heads song, is playing a loop through my brain and I can't get rid of it. It has been tickling the edges of my consciousness since I awoke. I literally try to shake it off as I concentrate on finding a rhythm. My schedule tells me this is an easy day, but lately I am trying to make even the least important run count, making each outing work for the upcoming racing season. Since I can't seem to keep the Talking Heads quiet, I invite them in, letting the insistent beat of the song set the pace. The first mile passes and I am beginning to feel warm and loose and fluid.

I turn east onto the dirt road and see the straight pink line on the horizon heralding the imminent arrival of the sun. The footing is soft and sure and the crunch of my shoes on the dirt makes a sound that is sweet and reassuring. This isn't the thumping sound of footfalls on paved roads, but something lighter and more satisfying. I pick up the pace, taking advantage of the cushion the dirt provides. As I turn south, the sun is rising over my left shoulder, half an orange disc showing above the gray-green water. Tiny lobster buoys bob in the distance, catching the first rays of the sun. The joy of the run has found me, rising with the new day.

I think about what needs to get done today, mentally arranging my schedule. Finish the column. Strip the beds and start a load of laundry. Wait until 9 to start returning phone calls, meanwhile you can answer the list of emails that have been in your in-box way too long. Take the dog to the vet. And can you please remember to register the car before you get stopped. "This ain't no Mudd Club, no CBGB. I ain't got time for that now." The song intrudes again and puts me back on pace.

As I turn back onto the pavement I am set upon by what appears to be the unnatural spawn of dog and weasel. Fearing for the safety of my ankles I slow down and see a woman run down her driveway shouting, "Grab her, please!" Scooping up a few pounds of writhing pooch flesh, I hand the dog off to her owner, who proudly informs me that her new puppy is a cross between a dachshund and a Yorkshire terrier. Continuing on my way, I muse that in the new parlance of designer dogs, it appears I've just met my first Dorkie.

I approach the only real hill on the run, long and curving to the west and lined with tall, thick trees. No matter how many times I run this route, I am invariably intimidated as I attack the incline. The work demands my complete concentration and I coach myself as I ascend. Relax your shoulders. Let your legs do the work. Shorten your stride. Concentrate. The road flattens out, my pace quickens, my breath comes easier, and I feel my heart rate slow.

By the time I reach my driveway, the sun is up, the town is beginning to bustle, and my unmade bed is no longer an invitation, just another chore on the list. In a little less than an hour, my day has been organized, my body has come alive, and I have connected once again with this place I love. And, with deliberation and purpose, I have added one more block in the foundation of this running life.

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