

The Running Life: Short is Sweet

Discovering the joys of the 5K

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It's been four years now. I can no longer pretend that next week, next month, next year, things will be better, be different. By things, I mean me. I'm injured. Broken. Not quite right. Some of what I'm experiencing goes hand-in-hand with aging. Muscles pull, tendons inflame, joints ache; this is the way of the flesh. These are maladies that I can manage. Daily stretching, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories and ice packs are in my permanent arsenal of go-to curatives. And anyway, aren't runners who are pushing their bodies supposed to deal with ongoing aches and pains?

Just as I was becoming a fairly solid age group marathoner, many of my peers having moved on to Curves workouts or needlepoint, I was stymied by The Injury. For several years, my back has been a limiting factor in my ability to improve or even maintain as a runner. There are times when it cooperates and lulls me into thinking, "This is it! Now I can pick my next marathon and start training." But eventually, usually after a longer-than-usual run, I'll wake up to discover that the simple act of putting my socks on has become a challenge. So I get in the pool or to the gym and do anything I can that won't piss my back off. And I mark the time until I can run again.

It was on one of those good days, running on a warm spring morning feeling pain-free and frisky, that I had a revelation. It occurred to me that, since my injury, I've been going about my recovery and my running all wrong.

Here's the thing. I've always thought of myself a long distance runner. My personality, disposition, body type and overall inclination seem to suit relatively high mileage and longer race distances. Give me a marathon over a 10K any day. I even had aspirations of aging into ultras. Nothing has changed in that regard, except that my body, more specifically my back, simply won't hold up under the demands of high-mileage training. Lately, if I can get in 30 miles in a week I'm feeling pretty good about my running. Any mileage over 35 makes me feel triumphant but is also likely to require a subsequent 20-mile week, with mind-numbing, soul-sucking pool runs thrown into the mix.

On that spring morning, however, I was gobsmacked by the obvious; if I can't train for distance, why not try training for speed? Let's assume for the sake of argument that the definition of speed can be fluid. Let's agree that when I refer to speed in this context, I'm talking about my personal and unique effort to test limits at shorter distances. It wouldn't be the kind of speed generally referenced in this magazine, but it would be a new concept for me.

In the interest of full disclosure, I confess that, until recently, races of less than 10K baffled me. I've done a handful of 5Ks in my life, but honestly, the pain and the effort always seemed well in excess of any subsequent rewards. The only time I've ever totally lost it at the finish line, yakking on fellow runners, volunteers and spectators alike, was at the end of my 5K PR. No marathon ever left me feeling as spent, depleted, or as thoroughly dreadful. That was early in my career. After that 5K debacle I concentrated on marathons and halves, throwing in the occasional 10K for training. Even those often seemed way too much like work to be enjoyable.

During the last few years, I've gotten slower and more tentative, risking little in an effort to preserve some sense of routine and good health. Any races in my schedule served more as social events than training efforts. I was losing my passion, my drive, my ability to dream. I missed the training that brought focus, structure, and a surprising amount of joy to my running. I missed mid-week tempo runs and long, slow distance on the weekends. I missed that delicious feeling of fatigue and accomplishment that gave me permission to lie on the couch with a giant latte and the Sunday book review and just rest for an hour or two.

It occurred to me only recently that, with luck, I could have that again or at least something similar. Preparing my body to run a 5K could provide some of what I have been missing. The training would have to be radically different. I would have to be both strategic and economic with my mileage, no more endless romps for the sheer joy of running. My fulfillment would have to come from concentrated effort and smart training.

While it's still early, just a few weeks into my new strategy, I have reason to be optimistic. A whole new world has opened up to me. I never thought I'd be able to say this, but I actually look forward to my track workouts. I'm not going to lie; the first few were torture, an exercise in frustration and boredom. I was slow, so slow I was reluctant to use my fancy new watch. A sundial would have been just as effective. But after the first couple of attempts, it occurred to me that my iPod was made for exactly this kind of workout. Without the danger of traffic, I could blast music that not only helped the time pass, it inspired me to move and allowed me concentrate on speed.

Much of the time I spend running is less contemplative now than it once was. During longer runs I could lose myself in thought and not remember how I got from point A to point B. These days that doesn't happen. Focusing on speed has taught me how to be completely in the moment, a totally physical being. It has given me a newfound appreciation of a body that, while imperfect, is still game to explore new frontiers of the running life.

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