

The Battle Run

I was running hard and I was running swiftly under the bright midday sun. Now, I am cool and very relaxed under the shade of this large New England Maple tree and the setting sun. From hot to cool, my day's experience is one I shall not long forget.

This Sunday summer day began like most; I rose, sauntered to the mailbox for the paper and fixed a light breakfast of toast, a banana and some tea prior to my long run. According to my marathon-training calendar, the recommended distance was 13 miles for this day but I decided a 10 miler at a faster tempo was what I wanted to do. "Have to go with the feeling sometime," I thought. My training was going well and I needed to test my strength. I chose the trails and rural roads near the lake for this workout. I knew this course and recognized that the rolling terrain would push me and I could speed past the lake on soft, pine needle cushioned trails.

It was 10:30 by the time I parked my jeep on the old graveled service road next to the old farm fields. This was later than intended but I considered the escalating heat as additional preparation to what I would experience in Las Vegas at the "Rock-n-Roll Marathon". There were only two other cars parked nearby, a small SUV with a license plate which read "TRIHD" and a small silver Toyota compact. I knew the Toyota was Bob's; he is a committed runner and was probably doing a long run today as well. I'm glad I did not see him or he would have wanted me to join him in his workout. I know he is at the 20-mile range and I needed to remain focus to my marathon training and stay the course of what I had planned and not get sucked in to a 20-mile battle. I really wanted to set a personal best at my race. Staying to the plan would help me get there. This parking area near the lake usually had about 10 cars on Sunday, usually runners, triathletes and hikers enjoying the natural gifts of the area. People must be taking in other summer activities today.

I turned off the engine grabbed a big gulp from my water bottle and then stepped into the rising mercury. It must be over 80 degrees already, I thought. Maybe I should back off, my mind reasoned. No, I need the heat experience I will push today.

I finished my stretching warm-up routine, took another long drink of water, removed my shirt and headed down the road. I love this type of hot weather. Here I am running with only shoes, shorts and sunglasses under a bright blue sky. This would be a good run. I eased into my pace. The first mile is always tough, the knees and joints slowly awakening and responding to

the jarring impact of each foot strike. This course would be perfect for the workout I wanted.

The first two miles started on this service road along open pastures, and then four-to-five miles of rolling frost-heaved bitten roads, then into the woods for the trails along the lake for approximately two miles and concluding with a mile back to the service road and my car. I knew this last mile was exactly a mile having measured it several times with my bike's odometer. If everything went well I would nail this final mile with a strong finish.

One mile down. The bright sunshine reflected off my glasses and sweat already covered my head, shoulders, arms and chest. Arms and legs moving freely and with good rhythm I scanned the fields for nature activity like deer, moose or predatory birds like hawks. I doubted if I would see any being nearly midday and this heat. The animals being smart were tucked away in some shady hiding spot. Look who is smart, I questioned, me running in the heat, they being cool and calm in the shadesomeplace. My breathing became a little more audible as I exited the service road onto the old country road. Two miles completed and a good pace according to my watch, now for the rolling hills.

I approached the first incline, feet springing lightly across the hot blacktop. My arms drove a rapid advance of this small hill. My chest heaved comfortably against the effort. I felt strong and knew my posture and mechanics were as fluid as a tiger pouncing towards its prey. Sweat dropped from my brow to strides left behind as I crested and continued down the road. There is the old Smiller Farm. The silo leaning next to the aged, red-faded farmhouse and barn strained against gravity, looking for a final rest at any point in the near future. More dense woods on and over both sides of the road provided for a momentary release from my solitary confinement of road and sun.

Here is one of the feeder streams to the lake up ahead. I always considered this to be the approximate 5K mark based on my previous times. A quick glance at my watch and I knew I was moving rapidly along. "Be solid, be consistent, be strong" coached my sun-baked brain.

The sun continued to roast everything within the reach of its solar rays. My effort is solid and with each step forward I feel the desire to go faster. Distance and time are external measurements that I am aware of and my internal spirit does not feel these numeric limits and soars onward. Mile four is now completed and the most significant incline and decline of this route will soon be my focus.

My footsteps echo light slaps to the pavement. I know that on the other side of the fast approaching rise will be the midway point. I need to keep this pace despite the challenge of searing heat and hill. It must be 90-plus degrees now. Here is the hill. Push! I demand of myself. My entire being is focused with determination. The grade fights back but I refuse to back off. My eyes remain completely targeted to points of land in the future. My breathing is forceful yet controlled. I am in control of my striving effort. I am now near the top, no resting, concentrate, and no relaxing. Up, up and over I go past large Oak trees and very old moss and lichen covered stonewalls. I command myself to not relax and to run through this decline. I feel relieved to be on the downside, my effort has not let up and I continue onward. There, five miles, midway point.

Sweat is pouring from my body. Muscles are shinning in the radiance of the sun. My thoughts are now to maintain an even pace and to cover the remaining two-plus road miles. This is the tempo part of my run. Mile six goes down quick. Around several curves and up-and-down rising and falling land, I press on. A car passes, the first of the day. I can tell the driver has glanced in their mirror at me. Are they feeling jealous? Or, are they wondering about this crazy person running on such a hot and humid day? I feel for the driver. I know they would rather be outside here with me. I am celebrating this great day. But, I wish I had something to drink right now.

The lake and the state park's entrance are up ahead around the corner. I should be able to get some relief from this sun and heat within certain branches of the wooded trails. Way down the road, another runner coming from the other direction. I guess I am not the only crazy person out here today. It's a woman. She is nearing the entrance and I am about a half-mile away. I wonder if we will pass each other or will she be running the trails today. Within a couple of minutes the answer to my question is known, she turns rapidly into the entrance past the gate and the park's large wooden sign, "Comgatme Lake Park". She is moving fast and I am slightly less than a quarter-mile away. I hope she runs the Lakeshore and Coolidge trails. These are near the lake and what I am planning on running. I can catch her. She will be my target. With three-plus miles to go, the hunt is on.

I do not slow down, as I turn right into the park and its parking lot. The surface is worn by many years of visitors and is compacted with hard sand and small stones. I fly past several parked cars with the trail entrance ahead. My arms are pumping solidly with less than a 5K to go. The heat and effort of the run have taken their toll but I am excited to be on the trails and to be in pursuit. I knew I could race over these footpaths.

A minute later I spot the blur of a figure take the upward curved bend on the path. I wonder if that is my target. Around the curve I rush. It's her, now I locked in. I can tell immediately I am not in pursuit of a jogger. She is a fast proficient runner.

Eight miles down, one mile on the trails, one mile on the road and a competition is about to develop. I am now less than 20 yards behind her. The musculature of her legs display the strength and passion of many running years. She too is enjoying the day's brilliant sunshine as she is wearing high-cut shorts and running bra. Long, confident strides take her quickly down the trail. I am taking in her magnificent physical form. By the signs of her sweat soaked clothing I know she has been out for a while as well. I do not seem to be making any additional progress. I am not closing the gap. Does she know I am here? She must know. I have lost a yard or two. I think that she knows and she is hungry and determined to lose me. I may have been blinded by beauty for a moment but this is my day and I will not be beaten.

Usually the lakeshore on this part of the trail could entice me to stop and relax but today it is a blur of water, rocks, trees and sky. I am driving to close the gap. I am now ten yards behind this tigress. Only a short distance further and we will exit the trails and be back on the road. I wonder if she will go left or right. I am working hard now. I am now off her left shoulder. If she goes left we collide if she goes right a new battle ensues. There is the path exit. Bounding stride for bounding stride this pair of runners exit nature with a right turn and a final mile to go.

My fierce competitor throws a quick glance left. Between speeding steps she knows an intense battle is on and picks up the pace. I am in awe of her intensity. I respond, catch and finally take a step ahead pushing myself hard. I enjoy running in front but my legs and knees are straining under this physical demand. I am laboring. She is there again and we are side-by-side, stride-for-stride.

Half-mile, less than three minutes and I will be back at my car and this fiery confrontation will be over. She surges, arms and legs pumping in a frenzied streaking race. Our forceful, labored breathing is loud and indicative of our efforts. She must be "TRIHD" thinking about the other car that was in the lot. I consider the possible meanings of this vanity - Try Hard...Tri, probably stands for triathlon or triathlete, ...Tri Hard, ...Triathlon Head. I don't know and it does not matter now! I need to surge now or wait for the final 100 yards and throw in a final kick to our cars, which have now come into view. Before I

can decide, this ferocious athlete grunts and pulls ahead. I have lost a step. My struggle is at its limit. A slight bend in the road and a final hundred yards is here. I am in anguish. This is it I must go now. I kick myself into my final gear. I have now become a sprinter. No longer relying on my endurance I have entered into the no-oxygen zone. Side-by-side, guttural responses emanate from deep within our strained bodies illustrating a pain not many have known. With a final gasp and push, sweat, blurred bodies crash through an imaginary tape across the road. I stumble, legs out of control towards a patch of green on the side of the road. No expression of macho pride on my behalf as I tumble onto the ground my chest expanding and collapsing, lungs heaving and grasping for oxygen. I stare up into the blue sky trying to recover.

A hoarse voice fraught with a desire for speaks, "Wow! Are you OK?"

I roll to an elbow looking up to strained blue eyes, sweat-drenched brown hair and a bent-over, chest-heaving body. "Yea...wow" I stagger a reply in response to what had just happened. We look at each other assessing the person who had caused such an intense effort and smile knowing today we have engaged in an extreme battle with a worthy competitor. Our hard-breathing, silent exchange of looks recognized that this runner's combat would become a proud memory for years to come.