

Southern Running

Walt Askew

March 22, 2024

I don't think of distance running as a sport. Actual sports involve skill, technique or strategy. Maybe there's another level of running where elegant flips of the ankle or advanced strategies for putting one foot in front of the other come into play, but I haven't found it yet. If I try to imagine what color commentary for running-if-it-was-sport sounds like, the words tumble into farce, "Look at the way he's making that turn! Just the perfect angle of attack going into it – I wonder what's going through his head right now?" It's not much of a mystery to me what's going on inside his head right now. It's alternating between a sharp blue exhausted emptiness and bargaining. Bargaining between the mind and the body, alternately begging and cajoling and pleading and prodding, trying to convince the legs to keep pounding forward. Promising that the end is in sight. Just a little longer until it's time to collapse into a tired heap of sweat and Gatorade. Begging, cajoling, pleading and prodding to push through the pain.

I've heard some people profess to enjoy running. I don't exactly understand what they mean. When I lace up my shoes and begin stretching for a run, I'm not getting ready for endorphins and dopamine. I expect, at some point before I return, to suffer for a bit. Not nobly or valiantly or meaningfully. And certainly not suffering comparable to that which people feel from loss or violence or hardship that isn't a self-imposed jog around a hilly circle. But at some point, I know my legs will begin to burn as they turn soft and my breath will tear sharply into the back of my throat and still not be enough to fill my ravenous lungs and a voice inside my head will beg me to stop and the rest of my body which has no voice will shout wordlessly for me to stop. And I have to say no. Just as a matter of course. This is a suffering I've spent too much of my life preparing to accept.

My high school cross country coach used to relate a potentially apocryphal anecdote about a world class marathon runner whose name I've forgotten. An interviewer asked how long into the race he got before it started to hurt. "Fifteen minutes," he replied. A fifteen minute prelude to over two hours of pain. Coach was good at setting expectations if nothing else. I might have naively imagined that with enough training, running would start to get easier. That'd I'd hone myself until speed became effortless. The opposite is true. Training supplies the tools for pushing a body harder and harder at an ever more unreasonable pace. Training unlocks ever more impossible lengths to push through. A never ending parade of barriers glowering on the horizon.

This short anecdote contained our coach's entire coaching strategy. That running is supposed to hurt, sure. Rubbery legs or ragged breaths would never be an excuse to skip a lap. But more fundamentally, that running is as much about mental fortitude as physical ability. That a successful runner is one who does not shy from pain but humbly accepts it. He was telling us that training is for learning to weather pain, not extinguishing it. So he set about training our minds as best he knew how.

"Askew!" he'd shout as he ran the warm-up with the team. "Yes, Coach?" I'd reply.

"Askew, did Darwin make the sun?"

"The sun?"

"That's right, Askew. The sun. Darwin, Charles Darwin – did he make the sun?"

"No, Coach." We'd been over this before. Coach explained that Charles Darwin, who did not create the sun, although many people seemed to act like he did, had in fact created an unscientific, unfalsifiable and unproven theory on the origin of life. For him, the idea that men had come from monkeys was degrading, defeatist. That man came from God and was destined for greatness was clear, and those who claimed otherwise were apologists for man's worst instincts. "That's right, Askew. God. God created the sun."

It's important to understand that Coach wasn't just a zealous street preacher or a crank performing for an impressionable young audience (although he was a bit of both those things.) Moral instruction was a critical part of his coaching strategy. It's what would give us the strength to push through the most agonizing leg of a race. No monkey would sign up to run in circles to the point of absolute exhaustion for no reward besides a plastic

medal. Willingly accepting suffering to no ostensible end is the sole provenance of humans. Coach saw putting aside the wants of the body for the pursuit of something greater as the essential matter of running. No wonder he pulled religion into it. Fasting, putting on hairshirts and chains, self-flagellation – Christianity provides an entire vocabulary for mortification of the flesh, an entire theology of the body as something to be exceeded. It offers a vision of the world as a toy of the devil, a place where suffering should be expected as part of the journey from a fallen world to heaven.

Not many folks in the Bible walk an easy path. Moses never gets to step foot in the holy land. Joseph gets tossed in a well and sold into slavery. Jesus is crucified. Job's suffering fills an entire book of the Bible, all for a wager he wasn't even betting on. But all this suffering has a noble gilt to it. It's variously cast as deserved penance, self sacrifice, or a measure of the strength of a faith that never wavers. Some folks speak about the martyrdom of early Christians in the same tone they do the fighting in World War II. With a mix of nostalgia and jealousy. A twinge of remorse that they didn't have a chance to go through that suffering themselves, to prove their faith and obedience to God or country unassailably. Without such a struggle to join, they're left to create proving grounds of their own design.

"Y'all look like the French after Ardennes!" Coach shouted after one disappointing practice. "The French *lost* Ardennes!" he clarified for anyone yet to take his History class. On a good day, we were Americans storming Normandy. The course weaving in and around our school's football stadium, which Coach measured and remeasured before every race, became a site of spiritual and moral struggle. Cross country running has a curious team aspect I've witnessed many times but have never been able to satisfactorily explain. Running is an intensely individual, even private, matter. There's nothing one teammate can do to help another get across the finish line any faster short of carrying them (which is, in fact, cause for disqualification.) But I've seen it time and again. Fast or slow races, good or bad practices, come in teams. Something hits the air and every single runner on the team comes in twenty seconds off where they usually are. Where they should be. We really did start to resemble a beaten army. But where did that failure come from?

The most obvious place to look would be on the physical plane. Perhaps the one and only thing every member of the team did share was the same training regimen. And the same coach. But pinning the blame on muscles,

bones and sinews never seemed to explain it. The feeling of failure came from a pit in my stomach, not a tightness in my thigh. For our Coach, the issue was clear. Our failures were moral failures. And I felt them in my bones.

One day after a strong race, Coach told me, “Good work, Askew. Now if you’d just get your politics straight, you could really be a great runner.” I didn’t know who’d sold me out, or how he’d figured me out. He’d heard me admit that Darwin didn’t create the sun, after all. But he’d spotted some piece of closeted progressivism that he believed was getting in the way of the crucial matter of running, of removing expectations of ease or endorphins to confront pain and spring through it as the Allies had hails of bullets on D-Day.

His was a conservatism of rugged self-reliance. Of dogged self-sufficiency. Whether real or imaginary being completely besides the point. A conservatism to which statements like “The government can hand out checks, but it can’t hand out character” sound profound. A conservatism that sees acceptance of aid as a moral failing. As a dereliction of responsibility. As an inability to face the struggle and triumph that makes up a life. So across warm ups, cool downs and long, slow distance runs, essentially any time he had the breath to spare, Coach took advantage of his chance to preach to a captive audience, trying to provide the moral instruction he believed would allow us to become good runners. We learned that modern art is liberal propaganda, socialism a mental illness, and that America had in fact won the Vietnam war. Narratives to the contrary were just examples of defeatism or a pernicious campaign to obscure America’s greatness as an offering to the altar of cultural relativism.

The upside was that strong team performances were moral and spiritual triumphs to be celebrated. Our successes infected him at least as much as our failures. Some days he’d take on a sublimely childlike glee and hunt for auspicious treasures. A broken computer tossed in a dumpster. A cinder block propping open a door. Half-rotten logs littering the trails we ran. He’d gallop to the top of the bleachers while we stretched below, lugging his treasure to the top row. And he’d toss his new favorite toy over the bleachers onto the concrete below, galloping back down to retrieve it and back up again to throw it over and over and over, whooping and cheering and grinning, watching with joy as it smashed to pieces. “Bwooooooh! Bwooo, bwooooooh!” he’d shout like a joyful broken fire alarm. The other coaches turned their heads, hoping that by ignoring the scene they were avoiding

complicity.

They were adults, and as adults had learned to find such raw expressions of emotion embarrassing. But to a group of tired, sweaty teenage boys, this was the greatest reward we could imagine. We'd run so well that we'd awakened something in our Coach. Our successes were written in fragments of cinder block joyously smashed apart by a man, famous for his severity and explosive temper, whom we'd reduced to a splitting grin, to a whooping, shouting, bleating, deranged joy, to a raw expression of his pride in us. He became one of us in those moments. Here was an adult that, just like us teenage boys, could imagine nothing more fun than smashing something to pieces.

His conservatism had pieces of that same glee. Once, I was at his house, and he was excited to show me the fruits of one of his favorite hobbies. He had a menagerie of figurines he'd painted and models he'd built. They were mostly World War II soldiers. Rifleman, grenadiers, machine gunners, all in dramatic poses, detailed and dressed to historic accuracy. And standing at the center of all these heroes was one little figurine. Clothed immaculately in a neatly tailored navy suit, stood a tiny Ronald Reagan.

The problem with Coach's program of running and moral instruction was that it worked too well. The team racked up state championship after championship, year after year. But I'd learned his lessons about pushing through pain much better than I'd learned to listen to my body. To me, the pain meant that it was working. It meant I was making progress. That my body was getting faster as my spirit became stronger. I was learning to exceed the limits of my body, but I was also learning to ignore its panicked demands to slow down. One day a tear in my thigh intruded on the sublimity of my acceptance of suffering. My running career ended in my junior year of high school, not too long after pulling off a sub ten minute two mile on the track. Twenty years later, long after I've given up on help from physical therapy, sports massages or chiropractory, my right thigh still makes an audible pop whenever I bend it a little too far.

This understanding of pain as progress is something I'm still working to unlearn. A dentist once prescribed me some toothpick-like sticks as a sort of alternative for flossing to help my receding gum line. She instructed me to gently push them into the gaps between my teeth, up against my gums, just until they started to lightly blanch with pressure. As I wiggled them in and out of my teeth, I figured my dentists must be wrong. I wasn't pushing them in hard enough. My gums weren't blanching enough. It didn't hurt

enough. And if it didn't hurt, it must not be working. I pushed the picks against my gums, in and out, until they bled and I took the pain as progress. I'm still unlearning these lessons.

And I'm still running today, the only way I know how. I seek out long hills and run up them till I'm ragged and then down and up again if I'm not ragged enough. Though not as quickly, and with a better ear for the whispers of my body and the limits of my creaking thigh. I still understand running as requiring nothing more than a body that can put one foot in front of the other and a head that won't ask it to stop. But I know that it is nothing more. That there was never anyone on the other side of the battles Coach told us we were fighting.

"Let the hill do the work!" I hear Coach shout as I coax my tired legs up yet another San Francisco Hill. I'm still trying to figure out what that one means. Twenty years ago, I took it to mean that the hill would do the hard work of tiring out other runners less able to throw themselves over it. Now, I think of the hill doing the work of providing me with exercise, with providing for a private part of myself I'm happy still exists that is willing to take up a challenge but content enough to see it as nothing more. As just a matter of course. And I think that is plenty.