

Running for Life
(Prologue)

This story is not about running for your life to stay alive. It is about running for health, the spirit of it, the challenge, and the feeling of being alive. It is a mix of fiction and truth.

What started my love of running? It began at an early age. I use to race my older brother around the block at the house we spent 10 years growing up in. One time in grade school during a PE session, the coach timed us running around the perimeter of our school play yard. He said I tied the second runner. I knew this was not true. I beat him by at least a minute. Summer time before my 10th grade high school year, I tried out for track. I had never run a quarter mile before. My best friend, at the time, lent me his spiked track shoes. I ran a 58 second lap. The coach said you are on the team.

I am not a fast runner. No 100 yard dash achievements. My forte was long distance running. For track, I only ran the 660 yard. Really too short a distance for me and I had limited success. I did come in 3rd at the CIF tournament semi-finals. I ran in the finals but did not place.

There was one event, that looking back on, I just have to laugh. I rarely won a 660 yard race. It seems I was always leading all the way around until the final curve and I got out kicked in the last 100 yards. This time the meet was at Manual Arts High School. This place looked more like a prison than a school. It also had a strange track. Instead of an oval, it was a square with rounded corners. The Southern league, that my school was in, was the toughest in all of the Los Angeles area. So as typical, I was leading at the first lap marker. Coming around the other side, there were some kids on the other side of the fence. They started throwing rocks at us runners. Really? You've got to be kidding. So here we go again. The final curve, and just as before, I get passed up down the stretch. Wait, not this time. I accelerated the last 10 yards, leaned over and broke the tape, just ahead of the guy who passed me. One of my few first place victories.

Cross country was where I fit the best. Typically races were conducted at

around 3 miles. There is something called the runner's high. It is when you are in the middle of a race and you feel nothing can slow you down. You are flying. During that period, I usually increased my pace passing other runners in front of me until my lungs starting crying from lack of oxygen. At that point, you just had to hang on, gut it out, and finish the race.

The rest of this story will be about some of my worse events and some of my best.

Even today, I still run but I have slowed down to between a fast walk and a slow jog.

Running for Life *(Chapter 1)*

I did fairly well all up to my high school graduation and even my first two years of college.

I had some highlights and some lowlights.

In high school I was assigned to “C” track and varsity cross country. The “C” was because they entered you by weight class. I only weighed 119 lbs. I won most of my track meet races. During league finals, I made a rookie mistake. I was running the 1320 yard distance. (Three laps around the oval) I got caught up in the moment as I was following the #1 league runner from Lowell High School. After the first two laps I was right behind him. Unfortunately, I had just run the fastest 880 yard distance of my life. A time of 2:08. I still had one more lap to complete. I made it all the way around the last curve with only 100 yards to finish when my legs turned to rubber. I actually fell down, got up and finished third. My time broke the school record, but it didn't count because I was not in first place.

Still, I consider my high school running a fair showing. I helped our cross country team win league Championship in the last race of the season. At that time I always ran barefoot. Non-spike running shoes had only just come on the market. This was not a problem for me as the soles of my feet were toughened up with constant running on asphalt and dirt.

I had one other highlight in my senior year. As mentioned before, I ran “C” track, but one time the coach put me in a Varsity race at the one mile distance. I had never competed at that distance. Our two top runners went out at their usual fast pace. I followed the other teams #1 runner around the oval for 3.5 laps and passed him in the last 100 yards to take 3rd place. That was my fastest recorded mile run at 4:45. Thirty years later, at the age of 47, I ran a 5:20 mile and took 3rd place in the Anaheim Corporate Challenge. I consider that harder than the 4:45 run when I was only 17.

Here is a recap of that race:

The previous week, I had the flu. So I did not train during that time. Maybe that gave me extra stored energy. Not sure. Here is my take on running the mile. You start out and hold your breath for 6 minutes. That is what it feels like to run fast for 4 laps.

For some reason, we lined up at the beginning of the first curve instead of the 50 yard line. As we took off, I was in last place out of 11 other runners. This time I keep a steady pace of 80 second laps. After each lap, I had passed several other runners. Down the final stretch, I was still in seventh place. Normally, we would only have 100 yards to reach the finish line. But since we started on the first curve, it was more like 200 yards. I managed to pass four other runners to take 3rd place. They only gave out medals for three places. The last guy I passed said if he had known that he would have beaten me. Ya right, talk is cheap.

So after 30 years, my time of 5:20 at 47 was only 35 seconds slower than my fastest mile of 4:45 at age 17. That is why I considered this my best race.

I continued to run cross country at Cal State Fullerton College. I remember one particular hot summer run. It was one of the few times I stopped during a race. I was approaching a steep hill, getting ready to do the short slow steps ideal for climbing, when I spotted a tarantula crossing my path. I took that as a bad omen. A sign to slow down. I stopped at the top of the hill. The #1 runner from our team ended up in the hospital with heat stroke.

Fast forward four years later. During my military service, I did not run at all. Back home in California, married with one child, I took up running again. If you want to read what I did during my Navy deployment, read my short story called “Almost True”.

There was a track across the street from my rented house in Anaheim. I timed myself for 1 quarter mile. I ran a 68 second lap, collapsed out of breath, and felt like calling 911. It seemed I had a lot of work to do to regain any trace of my former running condition.

One thing I have learned over the years is buy high quality running shoes. I did not do that at first. The cheap shoes I bought gave me bad blisters. New shoes, after lots of conditioning, I finally thought I was ready to compete again. I ran my first 10K race in Westminster at a place called Miles Square Park. I forgot my old lesson of starting out too fast. I got caught up in the excitement of the moment and ran the first mile in 6 minutes. Only 5.2 miles left. I watched as 2000 runners ran by me. I had used up all my energy in the first mile. I did finish though. I vowed never to let that happen again.

So began a lifelong love of 5K and 10K races. I never broke the 40 minute mark, but I almost did. My fastest recorded time for a 10K was 43 minutes. I have run in many different cities and on all kinds of courses. One of the most difficult courses I took on was at Mt. San Antonio College. Mt. SAC as it was known to runners. It was an extremely hilly course. I had just started an uphill climb when some kid on the sideline told his mom, “This guy looks like he is half dead!” I felt like strangling the kid. Instead, I just thought “How about you putting down your ice cream cone and get your plump body out here and try it yourself”.

I passed on my love of running to my son. When he was only 7 years old, he wanted to run a 5K with me. I told him I was not sure if he was ready for that. There was a large field near our apartment where I used to exercise. I told him if he could run around that three times, I would let him enter the next 5K. He ran around effortlessly talking the whole time. I knew he was a natural. We ran a 3 mile run up the Palm Springs Tram road together. It started at an elevation of 500 ft. and ended at 3500 ft. The first time we ran

together, I beat him. The second time he beat me.

While training for cross country, he and I used to run together. He would run in front of me running backwards taunting me with, “Come on old man!” Not done in mean way, that was just how we teased each other.

Just like me, he helped his team win the league Championship. I watched his race. He did his first mile in 5 minutes, beat his team's second best runner, and came in 4th overall in the entire league.

One of the easiest and most pleasant runs I did was the half marathon in San Diego. It was called “America's Finest City Marathon”. San Diego is really a nice city. It started a Point Loma, a peninsula out on San Diego Bay. I ran with my older brother. The first six miles was a gentle down hill. Then flat all around the bay. My brother talked constantly for the first six miles, then silence as the distance caught up to him. We ran the whole course together. The final mile was up the hill toward Balboa Park with the theme from “Rocky” playing in the background. Up until then, a half marathon was the farthest distance I had run.

That was about to change.

Next: Marathon training and run.

Running for Life (Chapter 2)

How would you train for a marathon? A non-runner might just say, run a bunch of marathons to get experience. In my opinion, a marathon is bad news for runners, both men and women. The human body is not equipped to run for 26.2 miles without sustaining major harm. I have witnessed elite athletes collapse a hundred yards from the finish line and try to crawl to the end. Some even lose their bowels in the final mile. Many end up in the hospital. So why do athletes do it? A challenge, just to say they did it. Just like climbers ascending Mount Everest. So that is one reason I wanted to try it once myself. Also, achieving a “Runner's High” really makes me feel alive. I could train and just cruise a marathon. Just take it easy. Walk to

catch my breath and just keep going. If I am going to do it, I want to do it right and accomplish something I am proud of.

Training alone doesn't work. You can talk yourself out of a hard workouts. Training with another athlete near your own level would work, but I didn't have such a friend. I hired a training coach. Someone to push me past my desire to quit. That is what I needed. I found such a guy. His name was Stan Hurley. When I look back on it, I should have found someone else. Why? This guy was a real animal. A sadistic hardcore torturer. I think he enjoyed seeing others in pain. I couldn't change in mid-stream though. I had already advanced him a months fee.

He asked me what my goal was. I told him I wanted to finish in the top 10.

I even had to do some trial runs before he would accept me as his student. Up front, he asked me for my best times at the mile, 5K, 10K, and half marathon.

Mile: 4:30
5K: 15:30
10K: 34 minutes
Half marathon" 1 hr 13 minutes

Instead of complimenting me on those times, he just said, we have our work cut out for ourselves. First of all, you need to pick a marathon that doesn't bring in the world's elite. With times like you quoted, you wouldn't even finish in the top 100. Forget the New York Marathon or the Boston Marathon. I suggest the Big Sur Marathon coming up in a couple months. Why pick that one? It is a beautiful coastal run in relatively cool temperatures, but has the most hills of any other on the West Coast. Why is that important? Because if you are going to have a chance, you need to practice hard conditioning on some hills. That will give you an advantage over runners faster than you. There will be plenty of those in this marathon.

An example of an elite runner. In the New York Marathon, Alberto Salazar was being dogged by Gomez from Mexico. At the half way point they were

running neck and neck. Then Salazar put together two back to back 4:30 miles together and left Gomez in the dust. He finished with a time of 2:08. That is a sub 5 minute mile pace. Now that is an elite.

So here are some tips for training for a marathon.

#1 Don't run any marathons. It will just weaken your body for the real run.

#2 Speed work. Get your body used to running faster than you will need to run for all that distance. Train for fast 10Ks with times under 30 minutes.

#3 Do interval training. Go to a track. Run 1 lap as fast as you can. Walk half a lap. Run a 660 as fast as you can. Walk a half lap. Run an 880 as fast as you can. Walk a half lap. Run a 1320 as fast as you can. Walk a lap. Now reverse the workout. Go back to the 880 and repeat each run in reverse so you end up running one lap to finish.

So Hurley met with me every two weeks after I followed the regimen he had mapped out. So far, this was nothing I couldn't handle. At each meeting, he timed me on various distances to chart my progress. I thought I was doing OK. After the first month, he told me I was ready to really start training now. I was thinking, what the hell have I been doing? I was exhausted almost every day. He drove me about 50 miles away to some sand dunes. Here is where we build up your hill climbing endurance. You see that sand dune over there. Ya, I see it. I want you to run up it as fast as you can. Turn around, walk back down, then repeat 10 times.



Have you every tried to run in sand? It is really tiresome. Still, I was paying for special training and I guess this constituted that. I managed to complete the 10 runs. I was ready to go back. I started walking toward his Jeep. Where are you going? I thought I was done. Not by a long shot. He had me doing those hill climbs until I dropped. I said, this is bullshit. There are no

sand dunes on the Big Sur course. OK, you can quit now, but forget about finishing in the top 10. You clocked some decent times, but you need an advantage over those faster runners. I am trying to get you that advantage.

So on it went. Fast 10Ks, interval training, and once a week, the sand dune torture.

In addition to the training, Stan recommended a diet. Not one to lose weight. With the hardcore training I had been doing, I didn't have an ounce of fat on me. What I needed was carbs. Pizza, spaghetti, steak, etc. Stay away from the greasy foods like hamburgers, fries, and things with heavy sugar. Compliment your meals with some roughage. You need to balance out the protein.

The big race day was approaching. My gut was tied in knots. This always happened before any track meet or distance run. Normal Adrenalin build up. The night before, I had a big bowl of spaghetti and two beers. My carbs were taken care of.

The marathon started at 6 AM. Not my favorite time, but I understand. It is a 2-5 hour event, depending on your level. Later in life, I always felt that those who finished a 10K in 35 minutes had it easier than I did. They were done with the torture early, whereas I took almost an hour.

Stan had surveyed the course and fitted me with a micro two way communication device. He said he would give me advice at crucial points in the run. This gave me a level of comfort knowing that he knew the course and knew my strong and weak points.

The gun went off and we all took off. It is common for the top runners to accelerate at the start as if they were running a 100 yard dash. Burn off some of that stored up energy and don't get stuck behind a slow pack. That is what



I did.



Here is one of those hills Stan was talking about.



I fell into a nice pace. I felt pretty good. In a long distance race like this one, it is good to just feel your way and find a pace that suits you. After all the workouts and training, I was running 5:30 miles and it felt fine. A marathon is not won in the first half of the race. At the half way point, I was in 30th place. Stan assured me that was a good spot. On the flats and downhills, I lost some positions, but on the up hills I gained them back. At 20 miles I was still around 30th. Stan had sent me advice on what to do at strategic points in the run. His calm voice instilled confidence in me and his words of encouragement helped. Not like that chubby kid who told his mom I looked half dead.

Stan informed me that the last 6 miles had the most difficult hills in the whole course. OK kid, here is where you make your move. There are two elite runners in front of you. Both have beaten you in past 10K races. You don't want to have to out kick them at the end. What do you mean at the end? My goal was to finish in the top 10. I feel that is within my reach. You can settle for that or go all out. It is up to you. Believe me when I say, you can psych out those two runners if you listen to my advice. You can do it kid. I hadn't even considered winning the race. Stan's confidence in me gave me new hope. OK, I will follow your advice and give it a try.

Stan's voice:

On the next hill, most of the front runners will slow down to conserve energy. Remember that sand dune?

How could I forget.

That is the secret edge I gave you. It was time to put it to good use.

I was still experiencing a runner's high. I felt like I could fly. On the next hill, I passed dozens of runners and found myself in 5th place with the lead runners in sight.

Todd Spencer and Bruce Goodall were the top runners Stan had told me about. They were running 1st and 3rd. OK Jake, you are in a good position. The last two miles have the steepest hill, but at the top it flattens out again. If you are not in front, you can't out kick either of them. Go for it.

In my mind, I was picturing that hated sand dune that I had climbed so many times. That image propelled me past both Todd and Bruce on the final hill. The finish line was in sight. Bruce had faded, but Todd was still gaining on me. With 20 yards to go, he passed me. It was time to see if anything was left in the tank. Stan's voice echoed in my headphone. Todd is wasted, give it your all. I caught up to Todd and we ran neck and neck. Just as we crossed the finish line, my legs turned to jelly. I stumbled and fell.



The next thing I knew, I was lying on a stretcher in the medical tent. Stan was looking down at me. I said sorry Stan, I couldn't make it those last steps, but second place was way beyond my expectations. What do you mean second place? As you stumbled across the finish line, your forward motion propelled you past Todd by a fraction of a second. You are the marathon winner.

Epilogue

That story is pure fiction. I will tell you though that at age 80, I am still running. My community has a 2.5 mile trail course that I walk and run. I have particular spots where I stop to catch my breath. The last part of the trail is a steep 16% up hill climb. I manage to run up that hill without stopping. I call it heartbreak hill. Maybe I should call it "Heartattack Hill". Someday it may will be my final run.

The End