On gentleness
November 26, 2017

If you can, be kind;
If not, at least be gentle.
Both are goals to keep in mind,
But only one is fundamental.
–Me

Personally, I think of kindness as positive support of others, and gentleness as an avoidance of negative words and actions.

On my good days, I try to be kind. When I am sleep-deprived and/or stressed out, I ask myself only to be gentle. This mindset is obviously not the stuff of sainthood, but it’s a way to get through the day.

This Thanksgiving weekend, I am feeling thankful for, among other things, a wife who is especially gentle, and a son who has made excellent progress in this area. (I’m referring to the 11-year-old, not the 10-month-old, who mostly ignores our frequent exhortations to “Be gentle!”

Even gentleness can be insome sometimes. For many years, I sort of turned up my nose at “Run gently out there,” the sign-off of Whidbey Island runner John Morelock in his many Internet posts and columns for UltraRunning magazine.

For me, running is first and foremost about self-improvement and competition rather than the community and the environment. I mostly aspire to run swiftly, boldly, determinedly, etc. “Gently” is not among my top 10 running-related adverbs.

Presumably, though, John wanted people to be gentle (when running) more or less in the way that I want to be gentle (when not running). In any case, if there was an appropriate time to debate his diction, that time has passed. John died of abdominal cancer on February 5th.

Rest gently, John Morelock.

My interview of John L. Parker, Jr.
July 15, 2015

As a young runner growing up in the 1980s, I got most of my inspirational reading from a small Florida publishing company called Cedarwinds. Cedarwinds was founded by a former miler and would-be novelist who, unable to convince existing publishers of the merits of his first manuscript, decided to print the darn thing himself … and the rest is history. Once a Runner became a cult classic and, eventually, a New York Times bestseller. A sequel, Again to Carthage, appeared in 2007; the prequel Racing the Rain was released yesterday.

In anticipation and celebration of this latest book, I conducted an email interview with the author, John L. Parker, Jr., after meeting him at a very nice Fleet Feet Seattle event in May. I hope others find the exchange below an interesting addition to other Parker interviews that can be found online, such as those by Benjamin Cheever and Gary Cohen.

GJC: When you referred to yourself as a novelist at the Fleet Feet Seattle event I attended in May, it sounded weird to me because I think of you mostly as a nonfiction writer (and yes, I count your political speechwriting as nonfiction) who once wrote a novel in your spare time (and then eventually generated a sequel decades later). Am I giving short shrift to the novelist part of your resume? Is “novelist” a central part of your identity?

JLP: Until recently Harper Lee had only published one novel and I’ve never had any problem calling the author of To Kill a Mockingbird a novelist. Now I’ve written three of the things, one of which has been in print for almost 40 years and been translated into eight or nine languages.

So yes, I think of myself as a novelist.

GJC: OK. If we go back to the birth of Once a Runner, how did you got started as a novelist? Had you taken any creative writing classes? Did you have a writing mentor? Did friends give critical feedback on drafts? Or were you mostly blazing your own path?

JLP: As an undergraduate, I was admitted into the advanced creative writing seminar at the University of Florida, led by Smith Kirkpatrick and Harry Crews, both published novelists. The writing program at UF had a little known but remarkable pedigree, having been influenced and guided at various times by the likes of Andrew Lytle, who founded the
Anyway, I attended the weekly seminar for several years, even after I was in law school.

Once I started *Once a Runner* several years later, however, I was on my own. For better or worse, I felt my subject matter was too esoteric for outside advice to be of much help. Also, I really didn’t know who I would have asked. Most of the book was written in North Carolina, where I was pretty isolated.

GJC: Do you remember absorbing any particularly important lessons from this writing seminar? Did you produce any writing in that setting that gave a hint of things to come?

JLP: I learned a great deal in the program, though both Kirk and Harry would often say that they couldn’t really “teach” anyone to write. They were there to try to guide us as we taught ourselves. So we met every Thursday night in building D in the old section of the UF campus, read each other’s stories out loud, and tried to figure it all out together.

From Kirk the most important thing I learned was that every story needs what he called “a backdrop.” By that he meant that for a story to have real gravitas it needed to be played out in front of a larger canvas, even if that context is only hinted at. For instance, you could write a story in which a man and woman meet one evening at a friend’s house and fall instantly in love. If the characters have any real depth, it could be an okay story even if they are completely isolated in time and space. But what if you find out that she is recovering from a suicide attempt and that he will be getting up at five the next morning to drop bombs on Frankfurt? A bare bones plot springs into three dimensions.

From Harry I learned, as he put it: “Every story is an ‘action.’” By that, he meant that something needed to happen. We were not into deconstructionist navel gazing in building D.

As for my own work in the course, I occasionally got a kind word from Smith or Harry for one of my stories, but then, I don’t think anyone even got into that program unless Kirk or Harry thought you were capable of writing something publishable.

GJC: At the Fleet Feet event I attended, you emphasized that novels (yours and others’) are rooted heavily in real-life people and events. You said that novel-writing is basically the construction of a narrative arc out of real-life components. (I am paraphrasing.) Can you tell us a bit more about how this construction process works for you? I’m partly wondering whether you tend to start with certain personal experiences and imagine how they could be arranged into a story, or whether you tend to start with a flight of fancy and then bring in relevant personal experiences as needed.

JLP: I usually start with real characters and/or events, and weave them into a narrative. In doing so I do not feel constrained to describe the characters or events accurately, although many times the details may be fairly true to real life. Also, I don’t feel limited to real chronologies, nor do I feel any compunction about blending two or three real people into one fictional character.

What comes out at the end of the process may not be recognizable to people who actually lived through the events that inspired the story, although they would surely recognize some of the details. The main point of my talk is that if you’re reading a novel and you encounter highly unlikely situations, or truly outrageous characters, you’d better think twice before proclaiming that the author has way too active an imagination. Often those events or characters turn out to be the most factually based events or characters in the story. That was exactly the point Bob Shacochis was making to the radio interviewer that I mentioned in the talk.

GJC: You have encountered many skeptical reviews of *Once a Runner* and *Again to Carthage*. Which aspects of these books have drawn the loudest or most persistent howls of disbelief, in your estimation? Quenton Cassidy’s 60-quarters workout? Football coach Dick Doobey’s utter stupidity? The physical assault and hallucinations that occur during the Olympic Trials marathon?

JLP: In my talk I probably exaggerated the number of incredulous reactions those plot points have received, but I’d say the 60 quarter workout has been met with the most disbelief. Bill Rodgers told me it was the only part of *Once a Runner* he found unrealistic. If I had heard about it from someone out of the blue, I might not have believed it myself. But I in fact did it, in my junior year.

GJC: What prompted you to do that workout, anyway? I’m guessing that it wasn’t your coach’s idea.

JLP: I almost did the workout by accident. I did the first 20 and didn’t feel all that bad. Normally, that would have been the end of the workout. But I was training alone that day for some reason, and it occurred to me that if I could manage to finish another set of 20 quarters, it would be almost unheard of. After I finished the 40th, although I was truly done in, I immediately began to toy with the idea of one more set. By the time I finished the mile recovery jog, I had decided to try it.

I knew it was crazy, but at the same time, it was a thrilling kind of a challenge, just to finish an unprecedented workout like that.

My mentor and coach, the Olympian Jack Bacheler, was horrified when he heard what I’d done. He was completely opposed to “stunt” workouts like that, and for the most part I agree with him. I certainly don’t recommend that young runners consider training this way. I was lucky I got away with it without any lasting damage.

GJC: So is it fair to say that this workout did not have quite the same significance to you as it does for Quenton Cassidy in *Once a Runner*? The workout struck me as arguably the climax of the novel, in which Quenton gives himself fully to his running and his coach and realizes his true capacity for self-punishment.

JLP: Yes, you could say that.

GJC: Many *Once a Runner* fans know that you tried to find a publisher for the book, couldn’t, and wound up publishing it yourself in 1978 — a full 25 years or so before the self-publishing industry really took off. How did you do it, in terms of logistics? Did you buy a printing press and set it up in your basement?
I was lucky enough to have a friend who owned a graphic design shop, and he allowed me to work on the book after hours. I spent several weeks of all-nighters getting it done. It was one of the happiest times of my life.

We had a firm in Jacksonville do a press run of 5,000 copies, which I found out later was actually a pretty big first printing. The average first novel released by the big publishing houses in New York sell 3,000 copies on average.

As it turned out, that was just the first of many printings.

JLP: No, but I set the type myself. In those days you set type on a phototypesetter, a huge machine that actually burned each letter onto a sheet of photographic paper that then had to be developed. It was a long, arduous process. Every line that had an error in it had to be reset, then literally cut and pasted over the erroneous line. In fact, that’s where the phrase “cut and paste” comes from.

GJC: Both the world of publishing and the world of running have changed a lot since the 1970s. If you had been born in, say, 1980, and graduated from college in 2002 or so, with an athletic trajectory similar to what you had in the 1960s and 70s, do you think you would have published a Once a Runner-like book by now (2015)? Why or why not?

JLP: I have no idea if I personally would have done it, but surely someone would have. For one thing, traditional publishing houses are much more open to books about running than they were in the mid-70s, when the success of Jim Fixx’s Complete Book of Running was a total surprise to them. For another thing, self-publishing is hundreds of times easier to do now that it was then. You have to remember, there were no personal computers then, no such thing as “desktop publishing,” not to mention no Amazon or ebooks.

When you think about it, the odds against Once a Runner ever seeing the light of day, much less becoming something of a success story, were incredibly slim.

GJC: We talked at Fleet Feet Seattle about how your old rival Jack Nason was unhappy with the portrayal of his fictional counterpart Jack Nubbins in Once a Runner, and how this reaction surprised you (but later led you to pay tribute to him in Again to Carthage). Have other real people reacted to their Once a Runner or Again to Carthage characters in ways that surprised you (and that you are able to share)?

JLP: Jack Nason was one of the few important characters in the books who was portrayed almost exactly as he was in real life. Some old teammates were mentioned in passing in the books, but they were not fully developed characters and I haven’t heard of anyone reacting negatively to being mentioned that way. The same goes for well known runners of the era, like Frank Shorter or Benji Durden, who appear pretty much as themselves. As far as I know, most of the guys were thrilled to be included. The high jumper Ron Jourdan used to call me several times a year, right up until his death recently. He was clearly the model for Ron “Spider” Gordon, the high jumper in Once a Runner, and nothing seemed to make him happier. He was the guy in the book who was sort of nonchalantly clearing 6-6 indoors on a sandy floor and a makeshift landing pit, stoned out of his mind. This was something I actually witnessed, more than once.

GJC: I’m sure you get asked this a lot, but I don’t know the answer, so here goes. Why the three-decade delay between Once a Runner and its sequel, Again to Carthage? Were you initially unsure that you wanted to do a sequel? Were you just busy with work that paid better than novel-writing?

JLP: After I finished Once a Runner, I assumed I would never write another novel about running. I had put everything I knew or felt about the subject into the book and couldn’t imagine that I would ever have anything to add to that.

As I grew older, that perspective changed. I found myself thinking about Cassidy’s life after his college years, and wondering what kinds of themes I might find there worthy of another novel. It took a number of years, but eventually it all began to come together in my head.

The idea for Racing the Rain came much more naturally. Most people would find my own childhood growing up in Florida somewhat out of the ordinary, and my early athletic career was certainly not the typical All American sports story. There seemed to be some material there. Additionally, the readership that had slowly grown around the other two books made me think there would be some interest in Quenton Cassidy’s early years, the kind of childhood and adolescence that would make him into the person he became.

I wrote one sentence that I thought would be the opening line in the book. It ended up being placed later in the story, but the moment I wrote it I knew I could write the novel.

GJC: That sentence could be the basis for a fun reader contest, in which they have to guess which sentence it was. Anyway, you said at Fleet Feet that a lot of being a good writer is just noticing the interesting things going on around you. In writing Again to Carthage and Racing the Rain, you were able to draw upon many additional years of noticing things. Has your skill in doing the writing itself also improved since Once a Runner? If so, how did that affect Again to Carthage and/or Racing the Rain?

JLP: I hope I’ve become a better writer over the years, but that really is for others to judge.

GJC: I’m wondering what you can tell me about the titles of the books of the trilogy. For example, each title follows the formula of: Important Word + Less Important Connecting Word + Important Word. Is that just a coincidence? Does that pattern have a rhythm that you like?

JLP: Apparently it does, though I hadn’t really thought about it in that way.

Racing the Rain was first suggested by Susan Moldow, the head of Scribner, after she read the first part of the book. Of course she was exactly right. I had been calling it all kinds of things up until then. It was much later that I Googled it and found out there was a similar title for some popular doggie book (The Art of Racing in the Rain). I suggested changing mine slightly, to Rain Racer, but Scribner didn’t want to change it at that point.

Once a Runner always seemed an apt title to me, based upon the traditional fairy tale’s opening phrase “Once upon a time…” To me that said that this was a story about a runner, a novel rather than a how-to book. Such a book hardly existed at the time. Well, there was The
GJC: Very interesting! In my original copy of Once a Runner, which I no longer have, there was a disclaimer along the lines of, “The author is aware of certain anachronisms in this book… To those who have ferreted them out, a hearty ‘well-done’!” Would a similar message befit Again to Carthage? I’m thinking especially of the fact that Quenton winds up training for and competing in what seems to be the 1980 Olympic Marathon Trials, which, as you know, doesn’t fit with other details indicating that he competed in a Montreal-like Olympics (1976) and then retired for quite a few years after that. You must have felt there were compelling reasons to make Quenton’s goal the 1980 Trials rather than some other race. Maybe you wanted to be able to draw upon your intimate knowledge of the 1980 Trials? Maybe the United States’ boycott of the 1980 Olympics made for a tidier story that could end at the Trials, without the necessity of an Olympic epilogue? Am I getting warm?

JLP: Yes, that constrained time window has always been a problem. In some of the earlier editions of Once a Runner, the first chapter specifically refers to the Montreal Olympics. But beginning (at the very least—it may have changed even earlier) with the Scribner hardcover edition, it simply says “The Games,” keeping it intentionally ambiguous.

According to Racing the Rain, Cassidy graduates high school in 1965. His senior year of college would therefore have been 1968–69. That would make November 1969, the 1972 most likely candidate. That allows pretty much everything else to fit. He could have come back while the Vietnam war was still going on and finished law school by 1975, then been in his law practice for several years before hearing the siren call from Mount Olympus once more around 1978.

The one thing that doesn’t work out with that scenario is that in Once a Runner, Frank Shorter is referred to in 1969 as the marathon gold medalist, which wasn’t the case until 1972. I guess that would be one of those little anachronisms that I mentioned, so a hearty “well done” to me!

But to answer your further question, yes, the plot of Again to Carthage was always going to pivot around the 1980 trials, because to me they perfectly represented the triumph of political idiocy over the higher ideals the Olympic Games have exemplified since the Classical era more than 2,000 years ago.

Carter’s pathetic boycott simply punished our own athletes for something another government had done: invade Afghanistan. And, oh irony of ironies, guess who also ended up invading Afghanistan some 20 years later?

But to this day Carter doesn’t appreciate what he did to our athletes. Whatever his other qualities, when it came to sports, Carter was always the equipment manager.

GJC: As you’re pointing out, Again to Carthage continues Once a Runner’s theme of incompetence, corruption, and/or stupidity on the part of bureaucrats and administrators. Given that anti-authority streak, I want to ask you what you think of TAC’s and USATF’s governance of track and field in the United States over the past four decades or so?

JLP: I’m not really qualified to comment on any specifics; I simply don’t keep up with that kind of thing. My intuition is that the politics of track and field in the U.S. have just gotten nastier and nastier over the years, and that the last people athletic officials have any concern for are the athletes. But that is based on just my own superficial impressions and what little I can glean from news accounts and from friends who are closer to the situation than I am.

The critique implicit in the three books is really based on my own personal experience with the athletic department at the University of Florida many years ago, as well as my general impression of the kinds of people who like to run things in this country, athletics included.

And, if you want to know what they are like, just try to remember the people who ran student government in your high school.

GJC: So Racing the Rain also includes some administrative villains? I’m imagining, say, an assistant principal who wants to expel Cassidy for missing class to compete at a big meet.

JLP: Actually, a lot of this book is about bad coaching more than bad administering.

But a further complication late in the story is Cassidy’s mentor’s possible connection to a double murder. The mentor, by the way, is a complete wild man who lives off the land far away from civilization and is very closely modeled after a real historical figure. And the double murder was based on a historical crime as well.

GJC: I look forward to reading about that! OK, last question. In Again to Carthage, Quenton explains the fulfillment of serious running: “When you’re a competitive runner in training you are constantly in a process of ascending… It is actually possible to be living for years in a state of constant betterment. To consider that you are better today than you were yesterday or a year ago, and that you will be better still tomorrow or next week or at tournament time your senior year. That if you’re doing it right you are an organism constantly evolving toward an agreed upon approximation of excellence.” Wouldn’t that be at least one definition of a spiritual state?

JLP: That passage really only pertains to someone still in their youth. After a certain point in your life, no matter how much you may strive, you can never again hope to be in that “process of ascending” he talks about in that letter.
Many ultramarathon runners talk fondly of the “ultrarunning community,” a diverse cohort of individuals united in our enjoyment of running absurdly long distances. We talk with each other, cheer for each other, and console each other, as kindred spirits do. We’re like a big, happy family with an abundance of eccentric, aerobic aunts and uncles.

But there’s at least one issue that brings out our petty, mean-spirited side: dropping out of races. We feel compelled to judge those whose performance is recorded as Did Not Finish (DNF), unless the DNF is attributed to a medical emergency or simply running out of time.

A perfect example is provided by Andy Jones-Wilkins. AJW is widely and perhaps rightly considered an inspiring ambassador for the sport of ultrarunning. I’ve met him; he’s a nice guy. But he once wrote a long blog post making insinuations about 5 elite runners (Scott Jurek, Anton Krupicka, Geoff Roes, Dave Mackey, Dave James) who had the gall to drop out of races.

1. Scott Jurek at Western States: I respect and admire Scott Jurek as I am sure most of the readers of this blog do. However, when he simply stepped off the trail at Devil’s Thumb this year a little of that respect drifted away. I would have thought the 7-time winner of WS would have gone a little further, dug a little deeper, tried a little harder, and given a little more before cutting off his wristband. Not to be. He dropped. Hal won. Game over.

2. Anton Krupicka at Leadville: This guy is an icon in the sport and really has not done a whole lot to deserve that status. But, he has won Leadville twice, torched both Rocky Raccoon and American River and this past year broke the Course Record at White River. Nonetheless, he dropped this year at the Fish Hatchery after leading Leadville for 70 miles. My son Logan, a huge Anton fan, was devastated. I know his quads were thrashed and he couldn’t walk another step. But, I recall another immensely talented, iconic Coloradan facing the same predicament back in 2004 and he struggled to the Finish only to ultimately finish the job the next year with a Course Record.

3. Geoff Roes at Miwok: I can’t really hold this dnf against him too much as his 100 mile Course Records during the balance of the year speak for themselves but in the most competitive sub-100 miler in the country I was quite surprised that Geoff cashed it in while still in the lead. I assume he was suffering mightily but a struggle to the finish and an 8th or 9th place finish would have spoken volumes. Maybe next year.

4. Dave Mackey at Western States: Nobody expected this. Nobody. Returning to Western States for the first time since 2004 and seemingly in the best shape of his life most prognosticators saw Dave as the man to beat or certainly a force to be reckoned with. Reduced to a walk on Cal Street he chose to end his day 78 miles from Squaw. I am sure he had his reasons but with Scott dropping at Michigan and Dave at The River, Hal had a cakewalk to the finish. More power to him. And, perhaps, to the rest of us as well.

5. Dave James at Western States: This guy has been incredible this year! On fire, actually. 13:05 100-mile split in Cleveland, a huge Course Record at Javelina, hell, he even did a 14:30 100 miler on New Year’s Eve just for kicks. But, he bailed at the Big Dance, hard. Dropped like a bag of potatoes before he even entered the Canyons. Why? I don’t know. But, to get it right in this sport you need to finish what you start. Hopefully, that’s coming in the year’s ahead.

In the comments, I called out AJW on his judgmentalism:

> Losing respect for someone based on a DNF without even knowing (or caring about) the particulars of the situation is just plain silly. AJW, you (and others) make the unfortunate assumption that everyone else should have the same racing goals and values as you (e.g., “dropping out is almost always wrong”).

AJW responded:

> I did not intend to pass judgement on Anton for dropping. By all accounts he did the right thing and I know he spent considerable time and energy trying to continue his race…. And, just to be clear, I was not judging Geoff, Dave, Dave or Scott either. I know they all had very good reasons to dnf (stomach, heat, injury, etc…) I was simply saying that, as an observer of the sport and a lover of the sport, I was disappointed that they dnf’d and I was wishing that they hadn’t.

To which I said:

> When you say you’re not judging these folks, I’m afraid I don’t quite buy it. “A little of that respect [for Jurek] drifted away” when he dropped out at WS? If you lost respect for him, how can you claim that you’re not judging him? Likewise, regarding Roes at Miwok, “a struggle to the finish and an 8th or 9th place finish would have spoken volumes.” You mean that struggling to the finish would have...
indicated great things about his character; the obvious implication is that dropping out indicates less-than-great things about his character…. You are indeed judging these people, whether or not you can admit it.

So why am I rehashing a four-year-old argument, aside from being a prisoner of my own ultra-stubbornness and ultra-persistence? Well, irunfar.com (home of a weekly column by AJW, by the way) just posted two pieces on DNFs: Your Ultra-Training Bag Of Tricks: Handling The Dreaded DNF (by Ian Torrence) and To Finish, Or Not (by Jessica Hamel). Both are interesting and well-written, yet both propagate the notion that a DNF is something to be avoided at all costs.

Torrence’s post begins,

Did. Not. Finish. They’re an ultrarunner’s three least-favorite words.

This may well be true. But couldn’t our three least favorite words be … oh, I don’t know … “thunder and lightning”? “Eggplant for dinner”? Sure, dropping out is often a major disappointment, but it’s not always the worst thing that happens at a race.

Hamel writes,

Elite runners are often scrutinized for their decision to DNF, especially when it comes at a time when they appear to be in a decent physical condition. These moments often result in “he/she could’ve walked into the finish” responses from the crowd. If the back of the packers can finish in over double the time and in worse condition, then why can’t elites push through their low moments to avoid a DNF?

The attitude summarized by Hamel is not necessarily her own, but it is prevalent. So I will answer the rhetorical question of why. They can no longer reach their goal of setting a PR. They’re not having fun anymore. They’re saving themselves for another race. They’re saving themselves for a tough upcoming week at the office. There are a million reasons, none requiring validation by a jury of peers. With few exceptions, ultrarunning is not a team sport, and ultrarunners are not professional athletes. The 99% of us who are hobbyists should be free to pursue our hobby in whatever manner gives us the most fulfillment and pleasure. So: can we as a community stop assuming that DNFs are, in general, tragedies of the highest order? Can we as individuals stop feeling so defensive about our decisions to drop out? I hope so.

Best DNF ever
April 15, 2014

About 46 miles into Saturday’s Mad City 100K, I slowed to a walk.

For a minute or two, walking felt AWESOME! But then even that became difficult, and my race was over. I got a ride from the arboretum aid station to the start/finish area, reported my status to the race director, and took shelter in a friend’s vehicle.

It was a disappointing outcome, to be sure, but it felt different than my past racing failures (e.g., Mad City 2008). This time I was more ready to accept the result, less worried about whether it was “fair” or avoidable. I began the race aware that it would be hard to reach my very specific goal of breaking 7:20; I took my shot; and I came up short. It’s a shame, but it’s no Greek tragedy.

Thanks to everyone who helped me get to this point. And congratulations to the Mad City finishers, especially women’s winner Pam Smith and the five (!) men (Zach Bitter, Joe Binder, Nick Accardo, Jim Sweeney, Kevin Grabowski) who did go under 7:20.
general population, ultramarathon runners appear healthier and report fewer missed work or school days due to illness or injury.”

The March 2014 issue of my local running magazine summarizes this study as follows: “Keep logging those miles, ultrarunners! Your body will thank you for it in the long run.”

See the difference?

The study itself simply notes that ultramarathoners are, by most measures, healthier than normal. The running magazine leaps (or perhaps sprints) to the conclusion that these runners’ training is what keeps them so healthy. But we can’t rule out the opposite: maybe these people’s good health is what allows them to run so much; maybe their impressive mileage tallies are an effect, rather than a cause, of their good health. Or maybe the ultrarunners surveyed differ from the general population in other ways, unrelated to running, that account for their superior health.

Numerous studies have provided strong evidence that running promotes good health, but this study isn’t one of them.

When the ridiculous becomes the routine
February 26, 2014

Yesterday I went for a total of 8 runs. Today I did 7 more.

This isn’t intended as bragging. Some of the runs were only half a mile, and none exceeded 3.5 miles. But they do add up.

My new several-short-runs-a-day schedule sort of emulates that of Pam Reed. As reported by 60 Minutes in 2005, Reed, from Tucson, Ariz., has an unorthodox approach. With no coach, no nutritionist and no training schedule, she simply runs as much as she can – up to five times a day. For a mother of three, that means in the middle of the night, in between errands, or during her son’s soccer practice.

When I first heard about this, I thought, “That’s ridiculous. Can’t she just carve out the time to do one or two ‘proper’ runs per day?”

It doesn’t seem so ridiculous anymore.

Before my left Achilles tendon gave out in 2010, I had adopted a Reed-like approach to commuting. But that was just a single 6-mile run on an easy day, or two of them on a harder day.

Fast-forward to today. I’ve moved to a different home, my Achilles is healthy again, I’m splitting my work time between UW’s main campus and a lab at the south end of Lake Union, and I have child drop-off/pick-up duties. All of this leads to itineraries like yesterday’s:

7:20 AM: B.F. Day (my son’s school) to South Lake Union (SLU), 2.5 miles
8:30 AM: SLU to Padelford Hall, 3.5 miles
11:25 AM: Padelford to Guggenheim Hall, 0.5 miles
12:20 PM: Guggenheim to Padelford, 0.5 miles
12:40 PM: Padelford to SLU, 3.5 miles
1:55 PM: SLU to Hitchcock Hall, 3 miles
3:45 PM: Hitchcock to Padelford, 1 mile
6:00 PM: Padelford to B.F. Day, 3 miles

You may ask whether I’m getting in any speedwork. Yes, I am. A couple of times per week, I’ll find myself late for an appointment across town, so that leg becomes a hard “tempo run.”

It remains to be seen whether I can translate this routine into decent race results. Pam Reed managed to win Badwater twice and set American records for distance covered over 24 and 48 hours, so I suppose there’s hope for me as well.

The center of attention?
November 8, 2013

My favorite pictures of me racing (e.g., from the 2005 World Cup 100K, 2006 Houston Ultra Event Weekend, 2006 Sunmart 50-Miler, and 2009 Sundodger 8K) now include this shot from the 2013 PNTF championships, taken by Seattle Running Club president Win Van Pelt.
It's a nice image of me grinding away on the unrelenting Lower Woodland Park course. But there's more. Behind me, clapping, is beloved coach and world-class talker Tom Cotner. At the extreme left is Doris Brown Heritage, one of the all-time greats of American distance running.

Often the most interesting people at a race are not the ones racing.

The once and future ultrarunner

October 25, 2013

To read my latest blog entry, head on over to SeattleRunningClub.org.

The playing fields of Eph-dom

October 8, 2013

As Williams College — the home of the Ephs — renovates its Weston Field Athletic Complex, “complex memories” are being collected and shared. Here are mine.

When I was an undergraduate at Williams, the short run down to Weston Field for cross-country practice was one of the best moments of my day. It often felt exhilarating to put away my work, put on my shorts, and burst out the door, full of anticipation. Would I be able to keep up with Billo today? What new stories from the weekend were circulating? Might I get to talk to one of the women? A lot of what I wanted out of life at the time was waiting for me at Weston.

We didn't do that many of our cross-country workouts at Weston's Plansky Track (named for coach Pete Farwell's predecessor, Tony Plansky), but one exception was the annual “Plansky workout.” For several days beforehand, the upperclassmen kept the details of the workout a secret while hyping its overall difficulty (“I've never puked so many shades of green before,” etc. etc. etc.) Then came the big reveal: Farwell, in Plansky's voice, assigning “fo-uh qwah-uh-ts” (4 quarters, i.e. 4 x 400 meters) in 80 to 82 seconds apiece … “because most of you will never race faster than that anyway.”

A final Weston memory comes from spring track. We distance runners had many talented teammates in the sprints, jumps, etc., but the one guy who absolutely knocked my socks off was Sal Salamone '93. During the winter, Sal competed with reasonable success in the 60-meter high hurdles and the 500-meter dash, but in the spring he focused on the 400-meter intermediate hurdles. Long-legged and lean, Sal sprang over those 36-inch barriers with the efficiency and grace of a halfback evading fallen tacklers. If any particular Eph was ever predestined to run
one particular race, surely it was Salvatore Salamone, Class of 1993, in the 400-

meter intermediate hurdles.

When the news came back from the 1993 national meet that Sal had been
disqualified, I was sad, but his legend remained intact. In my mind, a DQ was the
only plausible reason Sal would not have won.

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