

Thoughts of the Senior Ambassador

Running Through the Decades



When I first started running, I was in my mid 20's. On the surface, it doesn't seem or feel like it was that long ago. That is, until I do the math. Then I realize that I've been signing waivers, wearing bibs and collecting Tee shirts for nearly two thirds of my life. The waivers have gone from paper to electronic, the bibs now have electronic chips embedded in them, and Tee shirts have gone from all cotton to high tech moisture wicking fabrics. Instead of waiting a month for paper race results to be mailed, now they pop up on your cell phone

the second you cross the finish line.

A couple of months ago, I wrote about how drastically running has changed since I first became a runner. This month, I am taking the exact opposite approach, and writing about how much I have changed since my first steps what back in 1982. Of course, when I started running, it was all about running faster and faster. Every training run was a race. In the early days, I did most of my running on a local school track, and each run, I would try to run a personal best. I would try to run the first mile around 6:45, then hold it for as long as I could. Every run was painful, and I couldn't wait for the next day to do it all over again.

And of course, I was injured all the time too. Either it was a knee, or my ankles, or a groin. But I could always count on missing a couple of days at a time, sometimes weeks, just recovering from the physical ailments of my foolishness. But being young, I could afford down time and pick right up where I left off without losing any fitness. By the end of 1982, I was running 5K's in the 20 minute range, finally breaking 20 minutes the following March. It was the only time I ever broke 20 minutes.

Those first few years, although I couldn't get under 20 minutes again, I came within a few seconds of it countless times. I drew my energy from other people more or less my own age. They were usually the fastest runners and I wanted to be just like them. We usually had a lot in common besides running as well. Most of us were newlyweds, and we were having children, and we were all into sports, either participating in the sports we enjoyed, or talking about our favorite professional teams.

Into my 30's and early 40s, I still was running under 21 minutes on a good day. I thought I could keep doing these kinds of times forever. Every new year, I would make my 5K goal to run it in under 21 minutes, and every year, at some point, I would do it. In my 40's, those times were usually good enough to place in my age group. I was running in a Grand Prix series called "Run and See Georgia" that had races all over the state, and many, many runners would all run the same races. So every week, I would be competing with all the same runners, and there was a pocket of about 10 or so who ran about my pace. Some were my age, some were older, and some were younger. But every week, we would usually all finish within sight of each other, with a different person winning just about every time. Those were good days.

My injuries started when I was a little shy of 42 years old, the week after the last time I broke 21 minutes. It was a stress fracture in June, 1997 that I didn't allow to heal, and it wiped me out of running for about a year. When I came back, I was a minute slower than before, and my new goal was now sub 22. The effort involved felt just like 20 minutes felt years earlier. At this point in my life, I found myself gravitating towards people younger than me. I was fighting the reality that I was getting older, and somehow, associating with people younger than me made me feel like it was helping me push back the aging process. I mean, people my age were "old" in my book. The younger runners were faster, and I wanted to be like them.

This went on for years. In some ways, I actually think it helped me feel younger than I really was. Although my times gradually continued to slow, the slowdown wasn't as dramatic as I had imagined it would be. In my early 50s, I was still running 23 minutes, then later in the decade, 24 minutes for a 5K, and even into my mid 60s, I was still flirting with 25 minutes. Then, about a year ago, I had to stop running pretty much totally. I had played the age card to the max, and it finally caught up with me. I went from running over 2100 miles in 2020, to running only a couple hundred after my injuries started grabbing me about a year ago.

During my downtime, I spent a lot of time convincing myself that I would probably never be able to run again. It was a dark time. I was pretty much envious of all runners, but the ones I suddenly wished I was most like were runners my own age or older. What did they know that I haven't yet learned? Why could they still run in to their 70s and 80s and beyond? I am sure I could learn more about longevity from them than their youthful counterparts. After all, now THEY are the ones living the very dream I think about every day.

Thankfully, at least for now, I am on another comeback trail. I've started to lightly run again, but this time, I am mixing in some walking and changing my focus. I have started to race again, but a lot slower than I did before, by design for now. The time on the clock is not nearly as important as the time spent with a 40 year old friend...running. And I find that I am suddenly gravitating to the runners who are my age and older. I no longer care how to get faster. All I care about is just keeping on moving, regardless of my pace. There is a reason that in my age group and beyond, there are only a handful of runners still out there doing it. I am very fortunate to consider myself one of them, and for those who outdistance me in years, I want to learn as many secrets as they are willing to share.

A couple of weeks ago, at the Go Loco 5K, the gentleman parked next to me who obviously had some years on him. Despite his withered skin, he looked very lean and fit. I sprung up a conversation with him just to learn a little more about him. He said he was 75 years old, and blessed to still be able to run. He also said this was his first race since Peachtree in 1992. Then he went on continuing to say how thankful he was to still be able to run. He shared that he had recently gone to his high school reunion, and he was one of the very few who could even stand up or walk.

I figured that after I finished my race, I would wait for him to finish up and I would cheer the old man in, and then talk to him some more. But when I crossed the finish, I waited and waited, and he never came through. I was worried about him as I headed back to my car, and that is where I saw him. He had already changed clothes and was stretching. I asked him how the race went, and that is when I found out he beat me by close to 6 minutes. I want to be just like him when I grow up.

Please let me know what you think. I can be reached at Durunruner@yahoo.com