

Toads I Have Knowned

by John Farrow

The run started out like most others, a long gulp of water, some easy stretching, then a few minutes of easy strides to work out the kinks before finding a comfortable pace down a dusty trail in the foothills. Not much was stirring in the warm air unaffected by the twilight following a too-hot day. A few rabbits and lizards were hunkered down in the shade of bushes waiting for the sun to sink behind Mt. Taylor in the west.

And then my eyes got lucky and I saw him – my first horned toad in years. Those little guys used to be all over the place when I was a boy growing up in Texas (“horny toads,” we called them). Even after moving to Albuquerque, I would see them much more frequently than today.

Horned toads are really not much for running, although they are extremely quick when need be. And they rarely travel more than a few hundred yards in any one direction during their lives and will die of starvation if moved from their accustomed food supply. But they are incredible models when it comes to endurance, motivation and focus – essential characteristics for distance running.

Now, the purist among you may wish to correct me by stating that the horned toad is not really a toad at all, but a horned *lizard*. And on that score you would have some support among zoologists, who state that toads are generally considered to be tailless leaping amphibians and that the so-called horned toads are neither tailless nor amphibian nor do they do much leaping about. Frankly, not much of anything does much leaping about in the middle of a hot

summer day in Texas. And I would also reply that neither are sea horses of the family *equus*, my daughter’s guinea pigs aren’t really pigs (except for what they do to their cage), hot dogs aren’t really . . . well, that one is perhaps questionable. But you get the idea.

The most famous horned toad was “Old Rip.” According to the oft-repeated story, in 1897 a Justice of the Peace named Ernest Wood was dedicating the cornerstone of the new Eastland County Courthouse in Texas. Along with the usual items sealed in cornerstones in those days -- a Bible, a newspaper, a few timely photographs -- Judge Wood added a large horned toad his son had been playing with (this was long before most people had any concept of endangered species or animal cruelty).

In 1928, the old courthouse was demolished and everyone was on hand for the opening of the cornerstone. Old Rip’s apparently mummified carcass was removed along with the rest of the memorabilia, but soon, in full view of a large crowd, he awoke from 31 years of suspended animation.

Old Rip immediately became a celebrity and was exhibited around the country. Unfortunately, following a private audience at the White House with President Calvin Coolidge, Old Rip died. Of course, in those days President Coolidge was known to have that effect on those attempting to communicate with him.

But anyone who has ever watched a horned toad standing stoically in the middle of a red-ant bed for hours on end, patiently lapping up ants, can readily appreciate the amazing survival instincts of this animal, something we all need during the last 10k of a marathon. Just make mine Gatorade -- no ants, please.□

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