

Older, No Wiser

by John Farrow

*Tired . . . no energy . . . Achilles tendons sore . . .
legs felt like tree trunks . . . couldn't sleep . . . ITB
sore . . .*

Do phrases like these keep turning up in your log book? If so, maybe it's time for a little Come-to-Jesus meeting with the person who wrote them.

I was looking for answers. After a Boston Marathon qualifier in my first marathon, and on the tough New York City course to boot, the rest of the year had been spent getting stronger and running some solid mileage. There were even hill repeats and speed work a mile above sea level. Nothing like following the Kenyan training model to get stronger and faster.

This was definitely going to be the year, I thought, but then Boston had just been too hot. Runners were literally dropping like flies on Heartbreak Hill and I spent the latter part of that race pouring water over my head just to finish.

No matter – you can't control the weather. I'd nail New York again.

It was back to the hills, back to the track, more long runs. Carbohydrates morning, noon and night. Yessir, this was going to be the year.

It was as if a quest beckoned and nothing was going to stand in the way. Even the puppies wondered why I didn't take them out any more – they couldn't understand that the distances I was running were just too much for them.

In the weeks leading up to the marathon there seemed to be a lot more little aches and pains than usual but nothing major. Then there was a sinus infection but there were antibiotics for that. I did take an extra day off a few weeks before the race but something deep down inside said that wasn't enough. Another voice (a bit louder – I could've sworn it was my old high school football coach), said to get tough.

And so it was that race day in New York dawned unseasonably warm and humid. By seven miles a heavy, viscous blanket had draped itself over the city as runners jostled for position on the shadier parts of the course.

By the half-way point, my hamstrings were rebelling and soon the Queensborough Bridge loomed up ahead. It was a climb of some 120 feet in half a mile, but at least it was in the shade. It also brought on more hamstring rebellion.

Winding down off the bridge runners are catapulted into a screaming mass of spectators lining First Avenue that produces an adrenaline jolt only a cadaver could fail to appreciate. But in the wilting humidity, it helped for less than a mile. By then it was a battle of attrition as runners gasped for air in the energy-sapping mugginess.

In the 23rd mile I was afraid I had surely lost my mind when off to the left there appeared to be a woman walking her pet turtle down Fifth Avenue with a leash attached to its shell by a suction cup. This was just as a friend had done years ago when he swore there had been a battleship on a Colorado lake during a 100-mile mountain run. Fortunately a second look confirmed that I was not losing my mind and there was, in fact, a woman walking her pet turtle down Fifth Avenue on a leash. But leash laws must be strictly enforced on the Upper East Side.

Finally it was over and I shuffled slowly off to collapse into bed. I had done the training and seemed so ready. What had gone wrong?

Back home I got out a stack of old training logs. A few years back, when I was winning age group medals and setting personal bests in shorter distances, I was stunned to learn that I had been running all of sixteen miles a week. Sixteen miles! *Is there life at 16 miles a week*, I wondered?

But there were none of the notations about muscle soreness, sluggishness or insomnia, either. Plus the dogs had been a big part of running then.

Of course, that was before I decided to try a marathon and its longer training distances. Still, the first, at New York and a Boston qualifier, was one to savor. This year, though, had been a slog. Why?

Surely the two years couldn't be all that much different, could they? But one obvious fact quickly jumped out – this year's mileage was up, and definitely so. Let's see . . . divided by last year's, it's a difference of only . . . hmmm, an increase of something like, well, 56%.

What an idiot I've been!

It soon became painfully obvious that I had been exhibiting all the classic symptoms of overtraining – fatigue, muscle soreness, depressed immune system, insomnia – for the better part of a year and didn't (or wouldn't) acknowledge them. The prescription? To summarize E.F. Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*), "Less is more."

Less can be more. Some of the best running that I have ever done has been on less than 20 miles a week. Hundred mile months were the exception. Thousand mile years, rarities. And I had also supplemented my running with swimming, weights and cycling. Lately, however, I haven't been able to find my swim trunks, weight training at the gym is just a memory and my bike is gathering rust on the porch.

Here I've been a runner for the better part of my life, am now safely and inexorably ensconced in middle age but it seems that I still haven't learned how to run in this body, let alone listen to it. But now it's time for some serious rest, recuperation and re-ordering of priorities.

New York City ain't got no pity
For a man who's hobbling 'round,
Lord, you know it's true.
No sympathy for the likes of me.
I feel like an old broke down Buick,
Yeah, I got them broke down Buick blues.*

*With humble apologies to Lucinda Williams.