

Obsessed

Richard Gass

Read before the Literary Club November 29, 2004

John sat slumped over, staring at the floor and watching a large cockroach scurry across the dirty locker room. It was early March and the room was cold. A sign on the bulletin board read, "There is no hot water. Sorry for the inconvenience." John looked over at his training partner Sam. Sam pulled on a pair of shoes that had seen much better days and wearily said "Well, let's get this nightmare on the road." They trotted down Taft, turned right onto Auburn and then left down Dorchester. It was cold, raining and the light was fading. They had run 12 miles in the morning and now they were looking at twelve more. Worse, it was hills. They hated hills. But hills built strength, stamina and mental toughness.

Morale was low. There was little conversation. At Eden Park they turned right, skirting the park. Although tired, they ran with a smooth, fluid stride honed by thousands of miles. They jogged past the old Natural History Museum and hooked left. All too soon they reached Monastery. Monastery is long and steep, a worthy adversary. But it was the first hill and so not too bad. They ran stride for stride up Monastery, working hard but tempering the effort with the knowledge of hills to come. Still by the time they reached the top, their legs were heavy with lactic acid. The next two hills, Park Side and

Paradrome were shorter. John always thought of them as rest hills. They weren't, but it helped to think of them as such. Today they seemed worse than usual and John had to struggle to keep pace with Sam. Hill four which ran up behind the Krohn Conservatory was not particularly steep but was more than a kilometer. The pace was faster, and at the halfway point Sam had slipped a few strides ahead. Despite John's best efforts, Sam finished 20 yards ahead of him. Sam had better speed and almost always finished first on this hill, but usually only by a few strides. John's legs were jelly and the workout was only half over.

Hills five and six were Hill St. and Carney, both of which ended at the old monastery. Long, steep and late in the workout they sapped both mind and body. John could never decide which one he hated most. Maintaining even a semblance of form was a struggle. John could taste the lactic acid in his mouth and his quads protested with each step. At times like this, one's body started shutting down. Face muscles tensed, the upper body became stiff, legs uncoordinated, and breathing ragged. It was the runner's job to will the body into submission. At the top of Carney they stood for almost a minute. Heads down, hands on knees, unable to speak. They then slowly jogged back down and repeated both hills.

The jog back to Dorchester was a stumble. It was the last hill. It wasn't that steep but at the end of the workout it always felt hard. The sidewalk was cracked and uneven. In their current state they had to concentrate to avoid tripping.

With the hills behind them, their mood lightened and conversation resumed." I ran into Julie in the department this morning" John said. Neither much cared for Julie whom they considered overly "chirpy". "Oh," Sam replied. "Yes, she cheerfully informed me that I looked like shit. Said she thought exercise was supposed to give you more energy." "You do, you know" Sam said. "What?" said John "Look like shit" Sam replied. "Well, I feel like shit. You don't look so good yourself." "I know," Sam said. "I fell asleep in medieval seminar this morning." "Christ" John exclaimed. "There are what? Five people in that class." "Six, but yeah it was bad. Do you think we should back off?" They jogged

in silence for a few minutes. Finally, John said, “No, it’s just a bad patch. We can run through it. Anyway if you want to run like a Kenyan, you have to train like a Kenyan.”

Well, that was the crux of it. Throughout January and February they had run 140 miles a week. Now in March they were doing 120 with hills twice a week. Still, they knew others were working at least as hard. The plan, like many crackpot, half-baked ideas, had been hatched on the run.

Sam and John had been good, but not outstanding, collegiate runners. Sam at 5000 meters and John at 10,000. They had not known each other in college, but met when they came to UC as graduate students in History. One day while on a long run Sam had suggested that if they trained hard, maybe they could make the Olympic trials. It had seemed like a good idea at the time and John agreed. Fortunately their graduate program was not too taxing and they had ample time to train. They told no one of their goal, since *training* for the Olympics was like running for President. Anyone could do it.

To their surprise they both ran Olympic A standard times in the fall and thus qualified for the trials.

With an A standard time under their belts their ambitions grew and their goals shifted. Six months ago they would have been ecstatic to qualify for the trials. Now they thought about winning them, now they thought about Olympic medals. They spoke to no one about this, for the depth of their ambition seemed outlandish. They rarely talked about it even between themselves. However, their training reflected the new realities.

The Africans dominated distance running. At the last world cross-country championships Kenyans had taken the top 8 places. No American finished in the top twenty. Ethiopians Moroccans and Kenyans owned the 5 and 10,000. Not since Tokyo in 64 had an American won a gold medal at either distance. Opinions differed as to why. Some said the African’s advantage was genetic, some said it was the altitude, others postulated cultural or sociological factors. A few claimed the answer was simple: the Africans worked harder. John and Sam had long ago decided that the answer was work ethic.

Thus, their motto “If you want to run like a Kenyan, you have to train like a Kenyan.” In any event, this was the only variable they had any control over. There was a measure a self-delusion in this. Training like a Kenyan did not after all guarantee running like one. The gulf was enormous. The top Africans were almost 10 seconds a mile faster than the top Americans. To the uninitiated 10 seconds a mile might seem like nothing, but it could take months of hard training for an elite runner to gain a single second per mile.

By late March both Sam and John felt better. This was relative. They were still tired all the time and fell asleep in class with distressing regularity, but they no longer stumbled into things when walking. Easy runs began to feel, well easy.

April brought track work and speed. Their focus shifted and they no longer ran hills. Instead, they ran intervals twice a week. Their mileage remained at 120 a week, which meant running twice a day except for Saturday when they ran 20 early in the morning.

Although distance work is the foundation of a runner’s training program, it’s speed work that spells the difference between success and failure. And their opponents would have speed in abundance. Sam and John favored the classic approach used by Frank Shorter, 20 by 400. Run 400 meters, jog 100 meters and repeat 20 times. The object is to run each 400 as fast as possible. Ideally they should all be run in the same time but this is never achievable.

It was a beautiful April day. It was sunny; the air was cool and soft. They were on interval 11 of 20. The middle intervals were the hard intervals. John and Sam were already dead tired but they could not yet feel the end of the workout. This was where races were won or lost. They alternated leads. Number 11 was Sam’s. The first 100 meters were a matter of settling into the pace. The first 100 were painless. By 200 meters, it hurt. The last 200 were an exercise in pain management. Distance runners were good at that. Sam had to concentrate to maintain his form. A small voice told him that he could not maintain the pace, but Sam had heard the voice before and knew better. The body always protested long before it reached it’s real limits. Good runners knew the difference. Upon reaching the finish Sam looked at his watch and grabbed his knees.

“Fuck, that hurt.” John, his hands also on his knees and gasping for breath said nothing. After a few seconds they started a slow 100-meter jog. Each step was slow and tiny. “Fuck” John said “59.1”. Each interval was worse than the one before it, but only slightly. Number 18 was the worst psychologically. Paradoxically 19 and 20 were easier since they could feel the finish. The last was in 58.4. This was new territory. Perhaps a medal was within their grasp, and the trials were fast approaching.

The US Olympic committee had the good sense to hold the trials in Eugene, Oregon. The air was rife with the ghosts of American distance runners. Shorter, Prefontaine, Bachelor, all the greats had competed here. During the glory days of American distance running Eugene had been Mecca.

Physically they felt great. They had only run 50 miles a week for the last two weeks. For the first time in months they felt fresh and rested. Their bodies almost twitched with energy and on training runs; it took a conscious effort to keep from running too fast. Psychologically, they were wrecks. In order to make the finals, they first had to get through the heats. And the heats were perilous. There were four sections, top two in each section plus the four fastest times overall advanced to the finals. Based on their times they should make the finals easily. But they had both watched the trials four years ago and had seen physically superior athletes run stupid races and fail to make the finals.

So many things could go wrong. Your adrenaline could get the best of you causing you to bolt to the front at a manic pace. You could get boxed in amid a sea of jostling elbows and be unable to move to the front. There were many ways to lose a race, and in big races with a talented field, it was so easy to run a dumb race. They had talked at length about this. But it was easy to run a smart race from the couch.

In the end the heats were anti-climactic. They both won with ease. Sam was running the 5000 and John the 10. To the surprise of every one but John, Sam even made the 5000 final look easy. The pace had been fast but Sam ran near the front, stayed out of trouble and simply dropped the field in the last mile.

John milled around waiting for the starter's commands for the 10000 final. His mouth was dry, his legs felt weak and he must have been to the Port-o-Let six times in the last hour. All of which was normal. Sam was on the sidelines where he could coach John during the race. The 12 man field was deep. The clear favorite was Fred Simpson, a senior from Villanova. He was widely considered to be "the real deal." Fred owned the American record and had a great finishing kick. Simon Wagner was a local kid. A sophomore at Oregon he had finished second to Fred at the NCAA championships. He was young but talented and fearless. Dallas Carlisle and Roberto Gonzales, both Nike sponsored, could be counted on to be in the thick of things.

John heard the PA announcer say "Last call for the men's 10,000. All runners report to the starter." He jogged over to the starting line.

The starter looked at them "There will be two commands gentlemen, On your mark and then the gun." The starter, as always, tried to calm them. "Behind the line gentleman. Stand tall. Stand tall." Then "On your mark". The gun went off, John tried to control his breathing and to settle in. He ran in the back of the pack. In big races, the first mile is often slow but the pack went through in a relatively quick 4:30. Suddenly, Simon moved to the front and the pace dropped to 4:20. Fred moved up to second, a stride back of Simon. John heard Sam yell "move up, move up". John moved into third with Dallas and Roberto right behind. The pace soon dropped two runners off the back. Simon was relentless, the pace never varied and they went through the 3 mile mark in 13:10. The pack was down to nine now. John heard the voice saying, "it's too fast, you can't do it". And John was starting to hurt, but his stride was still smooth and fluid and he ignored the voice. Fred surged to the front. "Shit." Without even thinking about it John moved off Fred's shoulder; Simon dropped into third chased by Dallas and Roberto. The rest of the pack fragmented and dropped off the pace.

Fred's surge was vicious and John knew he couldn't hold the pace but didn't think Fred could either. The pace was killing. Simon lost contact with John and Fred, and was now being hunted by Dallas and Roberto. John grimly hung on. He was starting to overstride

and he knew he could not hold the pace much longer. He saw Fred's head tilt back slightly and knew that Fred was suffering too. They went through the fourth mile in 4:10. Then Fred eased off. The pace slowed to 4:25. John told himself that he didn't have to beat Fred; the top three went. Just hang on for as long as possible. He heard Sam yell, "Good, you're under record pace". They had a little less than a mile to go now. Simon was passed by Roberto who was a 100 meters behind John and Fred. John was running on adrenaline now. He could taste the lactic acid and his legs burned from fatigue. 800 to go.

The crowd was on its feet screaming. He heard Sam yell, "Go. Go now." The idea was ridiculous. "Now!" Sam yelled. John pulled into lane two and went around Fred. Fred was not about to throw in the towel, and stuck to his shoulder. With a lap to go Fred darted past him. Fred gained only two strides on him but it took John 200 meters to close the distance. As they came off the final turn they were stride for stride. There was no strategy now. They simply sprinted as fast as possible. John won by a stride, in 26:58.1. Fred was less than a half second back. They were the first Americans ever to break 27 minutes.

The world record was 26:20.31 held by Bekele of Ethiopia.