

JUDGES' COMMENTS

The writer's honesty about his bad manners during a trail run sparks a deep dive into the science of competition. An honest and exceptionally well written entry.



GOTTA RUN

FIGHTING THE URGE TO COME OUT ON TOP

BY **SCOTT MESSENGER**
ILLUSTRATION **ROBERT CARTER**

Near the halfway point, the trail became almost impassable. It was only a 10-kilometre race, but its dirt trail made it treacherous from the start. Within minutes of leaving the starting line, I plunged into the tangle of poplar, chokecherry, cranberry and dogwood that carpets the banks of Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River. The late summer days had coaxed gorgeous reds and purples and yellows from the foliage, but who cared? All that mattered was the linear metre of earth directly ahead, laced with roots and studded with stones. For two-and-a-half kilometres, the course rose and fell like river rapids, twisting and bucking capriciously. More than 370 runners were at its mercy. None got any.

The single redeeming quality of the trail was that, other than wasps defending their nests, it was mostly empty. A half-dozen of us had pulled away from the pack and fallen into single file as we saved energy for the final push. Within 15 minutes that changed. Racers running the 15K had set out prior to us on an overlapping track, and we were now closing the gap on the slower ones. Moments later, we were on them.

Trail running has an etiquette completely unlike road racing. Space is tight; the deer and coyotes that make these trails don't tamp out primitive highways by moving two or three abreast. Passing another runner in a trail race is more a matter of permission than power. As the forest dictates, you're expected to slow down and wait for a safe place to overtake.

I was new to trail racing, but not to common sense. Over the couple of off-road events I'd run previously, I'd developed a method that worked with solo runners: call out to pass from several metres back and they'd step aside for a breather. But in this particular race, the method failed when I came up behind a group of six. Or, rather, I failed.

Just up ahead, I could see that another 10K runner, a runner I didn't want to lose, was already past the group of four men and two women. They'd set a pace for a pleasant jog, seemingly oblivious to the fact that, for some of us, this was a race. "Pass on your left?" I called as I approached, my eyes fixed on the runner beyond them. That's when the trees began to close in around us. The men moved aside, yielding what they could of the narrowing path, and I passed. But the women didn't move. I broke my rhythm and slowed slightly. Frustrated and focused on the runner ahead, I abandoned etiquette like it was dead weight and picked up the pace just as we began to squeeze our way through a tight window in the aspen cover. I turned my body sideways to pass, my left shoulder like a knife edge. My right hand brushed against the thigh of the woman in the lead.

"Sorry!" I said, as I broke past.

"Hey!" she shouted. "You never do that on a trail! You're going to hurt somebody. Use your head!"

I waved again. Then I mustered every watt of power I had and churned hard into the earth. Just as much as I wanted to catch the runner ahead, I wanted to run away from the problem I'd made. The racer in front of me was pulling ahead. An acid burn gnawed at my thighs. I'd medalled in races, even won some, but this one was going to be for nothing. No. This one would be for worse than nothing. There was a time in my life when I pitied those driven by the desire to win. I reviled the

aggression and lack of compassion it tends to require. Now, with the faint taste of iron on my tongue, I was nurturing it. And that was when I realized, while pounding down that unfamiliar path, that I was a runner who'd lost his way.

RACING AHEAD TO EVOLUTIONARY THEORY TO SEEK explanations, or excuses, for my actions might seem like course-cutting, a cheater's solution to a situation he's not ready to face. But how else does one try to rationalize behaving like an animal?

Winning has been part of what it means to be alive since before humans walked the earth, let alone competed against one another in trail races. Since the first proto-organisms congealed in the primordial soup 4.4 billion years ago, evolution has played out as a kind of pro-wrestling, every-being-for-itself, battle royale (scripted or not, who can say?). Biologist Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, suggests we're not even talking about actual organisms going head to head for the right to survive. Instead, it's the genetic material. Genes perpetuate themselves through fitter beings, or else they end up in the junk pile that is the extinct 99 per cent of all species that have ever lived. The one per cent are left to duke it out in the ring, bashing each other with collapsible chairs and whatever else it takes to not end up on the wrong side of the ropes.

Each win, recognized with another dose of dopamine, creates a craving for another, and each has to be more potent than the last.

How wonderful it would have been, during that day on the trail, to shout back, "The genes made me do it!" Not that this would have absolved me. After all, it was not as if winning that race was tied to an opportunity to pass on any genes bent on replication and proliferation. Indeed, my wife's first words after any of my races are invariably, "Go have a shower. Please."

Nevertheless, the beauty of Dawkins's theory is that it helps explain, if not quite forgive, my actions on the trail. It attributes the need to win to impulses beyond my control. During a 2014 interview in which he revisited his influential theory, Dawkins described the individual – human or otherwise – as little more than a stop along

the way for genes just passing through. "An individual organism is a throwaway survival machine for the self-replicating, coded information which it contains," he wrote. Dawkins also reiterated the fact that he was often told his book should have been called *The Immortal Gene*. In terms of sheer longevity, genes win. The individual has simply learned to find comfort in short-term successes.

From an evolutionary perspective, running is a tidy fit with Dawkins's theory. Humans are ideally suited for long-distance running. As Christopher McDougall describes in his book *Born to Run*, our physiology is unique in that no other mammal sweats, and no other mammal – for differences in the way that biped and quadruped organs are arranged – can take more than one breath per stride. An antelope would outpace a human in the early stage of a marathon, but would soon be out of breath, and be easy pickings. "To run an antelope to death," McDougall writes, "all you have to do is scare it into a gallop on a hot day."

Underlying that tip is the fact that we survived as individuals and as a species – we won, that is – because we ran. And we ran because we needed to eat; they were one and the same. Now they're not. But the immortal gene, born untold eons ago, lives in ignorant bliss of this altered, easier world. That bagging an antelope has been replaced with picking up food at the drive-thru after the race means nothing to the gene. It still figures you should run like that coffee and muffin are dissolving into the fringed horizon of the savannah, disappearing forever from sight. So, you run.

WE ARE, OF COURSE, MORE THAN JUST THE UNWITTING product of various combinations of bits of DNA. We're also products of our past. And that makes me a product of minor hockey.

I grew up in St. Albert, a suburban city barnacled to the northwest corner of Edmonton. Like many boys at my school, I started hockey when I was six. My parents didn't push me into it, but I have no memory of a great desire to play. But culture in smaller cities and towns tends to be built on The Way Things Have Always Been Done; stick to convention and life tends to be easier. At least in theory.

Almost without fail, I ranked as the weakest performer on the weakest teams in the weakest divisions. Dandelion-pickers in youth soccer at least have an excuse; nothing grows on ice to justify lingering behind the play, which is what I did for much of my seven years in the game. It drove my dad nuts.

Not that he'd ever had any illusions about his boy making it in the big leagues. After all, I scored fewer than

20 goals during my entire minor hockey career. Now that I'm a parent, I think I understand his irritation. He and my mom footed the bill for registration and equipment with money that was in short supply; he and my mom sacrificed weekend sleep-ins to get me to 6 a.m. games; and he and my mom had to watch from the stands as I was effortlessly sidestepped by one opposing forward after another. It was just a game but my performance spoke to how much I valued being given the chance to play it.

Being shouted at by my dad during car rides home from arenas suggested that he felt I did not value it much at all. Why did he bother? he wondered very loudly. I started to try harder, but it was too late to catch up with kids who'd made the effort years earlier. Just the same, one day, after another dreadful game, I waited for the inevitable during the drive home. It didn't come. What came instead was worse.

"You know what," said my dad, shrugging as he drove, "do what you want. It doesn't matter anymore."

To lower his blood pressure, he'd lowered his expectations, silencing, maybe, the same impulse to stand out that I'd see in myself when I turned his age. He'd accepted the reality that I was not and would not be exceptional in a way that, in our suburban city, actually mattered.

Later, in the middle of my first season in peewee, in which every other 13-year-old seemed to have grown six inches and gained 25 pounds, I quit. And my dad let me, without argument. We'd had enough, each in our own way.

Which brings me to midlife, that breeding ground of existential crises rooted in personal shortcomings. Recently, I passed the statistical fulcrum in the lifespan of the typical Canadian male, the seesaw tipping into decline. Erik Erikson, the psychoanalyst famous for defining the stages of human development, didn't see this crossing over into "late adulthood" as inevitably entwined with philandering, sports cars and other forms of bucket-list gratification. For him, it was marked by an impulse to transfer community-building knowledge to younger generations. It's a nice thought. But maybe it's when we can't figure out how to light the torch we're supposed to pass that questions of purpose and self-worth lead to simple distractions as answers.

I'd come to long-distance running later in life, in my mid-30s, and discovered a talent for it. I've never been anywhere near elite, but became fast enough to rank among the top two to five per cent of bigger local racers, and sometimes placing top three in smaller events. It was meaningless, but it fostered the illusion that I was making up for the lost years of minor hockey. The illusion has remained alive and well.

This past summer, I recruited a trainer to help shave off the seconds that have kept me out of the top three in my age category at the annual Edmonton Marathon, the biggest race of its kind in my city. Early in the season, we evaluated my fitness through a VO2 max test, which determines how well the body distributes oxygen to the muscles, measured in millilitres per kilogram of body weight per minute. Generally, this test is not meant for amateurs like me. Elite athletes use it to identify hairline cracks in their fitness, then design training programs to seal them shut. It requires revving the heart to its maximum beats per minute and maintaining that to the point of exhaustion. All the while, a mask is clamped over your mouth and nose as the trainer plots that data against oxygen in and carbon dioxide out. At the start of the season, we hit 51.2 ml/kg/minute, placing me, said my trainer, within the top 20 per cent of males my age. After several weeks of running workouts, a retest showed that we'd pushed it to 55.5, an increase of about eight per cent. I was unduly encouraged. The body may have been ageing, but it was still willing. To a point, at least. In the half-marathon a couple weeks later, I ran to a fourth-place finish in my age category, missing third by just seconds per kilometre. (Dad, for the record, was there, taking pictures from the road-side.)

"There's still plenty of time for you," said my 29-year-old trainer.

This was a terrible thing to hear, because I believed him. Before the end of the season, I ran two more races, another half-marathon and a 15K. I placed third overall in both by running well beyond my limits. During the half, I recklessly pounded down hills, making my right femur a pestle in the mortar of my hip socket. The pain resurfaced a few weeks later in the 15K, a paved course through an eastern section of the undulating river valley. For days afterwards, the hip pain would slow my progress to the bathroom, which I visited to hack up phlegm from my overworked lungs.

But those third-place trinkets may as well have been Olympic gold, glimmering with the promise of what could be made of my busted body. I contacted my trainer immediately following the 15K, almost automatically, as if my genes themselves noticed the beating I'd taken and were worried I might do the sensible thing and hang up the sneakers. What I needed was a plan not just to get through the winter but to keep building. Sure, I was hobbling about, but I swore I was ready. I had cleats for my runners, and I'd be damned if they didn't bite into the ice every bit as well as a pair of skates.

REGARDLESS OF BEING AWARE OF THE DAMAGE I'M doing, I do it anyway. Pain shoots through my hip and I run on. If my heart skips a beat – and sometimes it does – I punch my chest and keep moving as it catches up. I'll nearly shove someone into the undergrowth and wave an apology.

To the detriment of mankind, a major factor in these kinds of choices is testosterone, a hormone that rarely plays a role in the making of wise decisions. Neuroscientist Ian Robertson documents this in detail in his 2012 book, *The Winner Effect*. Essentially, testosterone creates a taste for winning by increasing the levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain, which signals that you should keep doing whatever it is that you're doing, even if that's cocaine or heroin. "A certain amount of dopamine invigorates you, motivates you," writes Robertson. "Above all, it gives you an appetite for risk."

"There's still plenty of time for you," said my 29-year-old trainer.

That appetite increases and more so for men than for women, whose bodies typically contain a fraction of the testosterone measured in men. Robertson illustrates this by way of boxer Mike Tyson's comeback. Manager Don King had a brilliant if underwhelming plan. In 1995, he set Tyson up, fresh from three years of incarceration, against a couple of "tomato cans," or opponents who didn't stand a chance. He won both, then regained world champion status the next year.

Part of the reason for that, Robertson explains, lies in neurological changes. Each win, regardless of the level of competition, can stimulate the formation of more testosterone receptors. A surge of the hormone before competition signals the release of more dopamine, which also "sharpens you mentally" and prepares the body to manage (or ignore) whatever risk is involved in reaching the reward. "The real effect of winning is in physically shaping the brain," says Robertson, "so that the brain behaves like a turbo-charged car that pushes out more power for the same amount of gasoline." Tyson, in other words, wasn't necessarily honing his technical skills by dispensing with the tomato cans – he was flooding his brain with the hunger to win.

Each win, recognized with another dose of dopamine,

a crook that signifies home

i read an article
in the cbc today
that declared that
*arthritis affects
Indigenous people
at a rate
three times higher
than average*

i wonder what it
means when
trauma makes
a house with/in
bones, when
marrow is sweet
with the
tongues and
acimowin of
your kin,
obliterated
by the intense
yet boring
mechanisms
that make
an endoskeleton
creak

i wonder too
what it means
to have diabetes
in a food desert
and have it
attributed
to one's genes,

as if to suggest
that settler
colonialism is a
mirage,
a bad dream
of impotable
water, a
nightmare only
fit to drink,
if it is
boiled

i wonder what
it means to
go to a therapist
and have them
ascribe your
fury to
FASD,
to diagnose
relatives,
in absence,
as vessels
marred by,
and carrying
with/in them
spirits that
harm,
overdetermined
through
bodily and
facial
ticks (or
"abnormalities")

i wonder what
it's like to be
fat and free
of disease
and insulin
injections,
for it to
be fine
to have a
thin upper
lip, stiff
from having
to answer
inane questions
from invasive
"healers," to
treat wide-set
eyes as
a gift
from your
ancestors

i wonder
what it is
like to not
have a
predetermined
bundle of
signifiers rest
heavily on one's
shoulders,
to be able
to shrug off
an entire

discursive field
built on/off
the rigid but
brittle backs
of your
relatives

to
not know
that the
crook in your
kohkum's
neck comes
from carrying
so many
little ones,
marked
the moment
they take in
that first
breath,
pushing the
air back
out,
through
their always
already
arthritic
bones

– Dallas Hunt

creates a craving for another, and each has to be more potent than the last to satisfy the ever-growing need for that rush. In other words, winning not only does not satisfy the urge to win, it makes it even more urgent to win the next time. It's hard to imagine this drive being limited to boxing or even the prospect of standing atop a plywood

podium for smartphone snapshots in some city park at the end of an amateur trail race. It almost certainly has a role in tweets such as, "America is winning again!" and nuclear threats about which world leader has the biggest "button." And, if the past is any indication, it's divorced from objective outcomes, as long as those outcomes

can somehow be subjectively identified as a win. Even if they're Pyrrhic.

In 280 B.C., the Greek king Pyrrhus – said to think of himself as the next Alexander the Great – invaded Italy and defeated Roman armies that were larger and better trained than his own. But his losses were staggering. “If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined,” said the king.

After all these years, we still call his campaigns, and anything that might compare in the modern age, victories, even if we know that, logically speaking, he lost badly, even stupidly. It's as if a short-term win trumps a loss under any circumstances, and that this notion is hardwired into our psyches. Because of it, we embrace illogicality, and perpetuate it for millennia. If the first runner across a finish line raises his or her arms before promptly dropping dead, well, at least they gave it their all. At least they went out a winner.

VINCE LOMBARDI, REGARDED BY MANY AS THE greatest coach in NFL history, liked to say, “Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing.” The quote was borrowed from a college football coach but it stood for a philosophy Lombardi owned. In 1961, he turned the dismal Green Bay Packers into league champions; he started to do the same with the Washington Redskins in 1969 before dying of colon cancer the following year. He won five championships and six conference titles over the course of nearly a decade. Today, the Superbowl trophy bears his name.

This brings me to midlife, that fecund breeding ground of existential crises rooted in personal shortcomings.

I'd like to say that Lombardi was wrong, because I want to be able to tell my children the opposite, that winning isn't everything, and not be lying to them when I do. My daughters, six and three years old, have stood roadside at my races, jumped up and down as I approached and stuck out tiny hands for high-fives. At times like that, which last no more than the few seconds it takes to pass

by them, I think I'm at my best as a role model. But what if they had seen me pushing my way through that trail in the poplars? Would they see that as being what it takes for someone to literally get ahead? And would they be right?

While part of me (and it may be the genes talking) believes a better life might be had for them in being better than their competition, I hope my children can resist what I have not. Maybe they'll grow up to see, unlike I did, that not winning doesn't have to mean losing, and that the middle ground between those outcomes is a solid enough base upon which to build a life.

What that will require is something that I often find difficult. I hope my children will like themselves enough to be content with who they are, with their accomplishments and their place in the world, which, at the granular level of the community, usually asks only that you contribute based on your strengths and passions. Combined with sincerity, that approach can work perfectly well and it can create conditions in which people thrive. I've heard it can even lead to happiness.

Ultimately, I hope my children turn out to be people who would have looked at their father after he'd passed the women on the trail and, shocked and dismayed, said, “What's the point, man? This isn't the Superbowl.”

There are times when I think I can change, that I can be a person they look up to for the right reasons. At the end of the 2016 Edmonton Marathon, where I ran the half, I met the man I risk becoming. Once the nausea of the final push to the finish line passed, I headed into the conference centre where the race started and ended, and where brunch was being served. After being among the early runners to cross the finish line, I found the room cavernous and empty. I sat alone at a table for eight near the front, where results scrolled past on a screen like credits at the end of a film. My name came up, buried, a bit player in the supporting cast. I was fifth in my age group, a six-minute snail trail from that ever-elusive third-place medal.

As I glumly shovelled in scrambled eggs and an English muffin, tasting nothing, I was joined by a man, 60-something, beads of moisture in his slate-grey beard, and still looking a little disoriented from exertion. He sat down and watched for his results. When they came up, his face slackened. He'd finished among the top 20 per cent overall, but hadn't been fast enough to qualify for Boston. We shared our disappointments as liberally as we did the salt and pepper on the table, and continued with our unhappy brunch. His name, no word of a lie, was Scott, too.

It was one of the low points in my life as a runner (better, I admit, than shoving aside a fellow runner). Though in time I'd come to see it as one of the turning points, a warning that might have been wasted on me as a younger man, but that could one day put an older me back on track. The scene strikes me as ridiculously Dickensian: the junior Scott is given a chance look across the table at the elder to wonder, “Is that what I want to become?” At the same time, older Scott could glance up from his plate and think, “Is that why I'm the way I am?” But neither is ready to see the moment as revealing of fault, which, really, is the failure to embrace the joy of running, a simple act made extraordinary for the fact that, between steps, you're airborne. Over the course of a race, a runner can spend almost half of it with both feet off the ground, essentially beating gravity. I can understand the biomechanics underlying that transcendence, but, during a race, it doesn't yet uplift me in anything other than a practical way.

And yet, with ageing, I find that, just as the body aches more keenly, the mind becomes more self-aware. I

understand the potential of my limitations, even if I'm not yet willing to accept it.

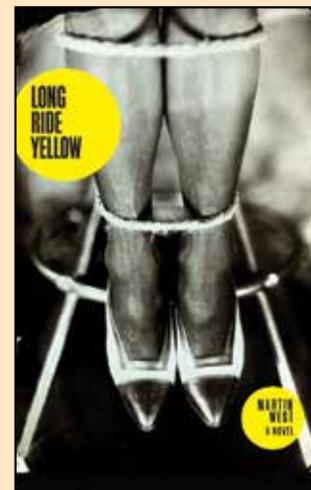
But I also know, with likely fewer years ahead of me than behind me, that I'm not just training for the next big race. I know I'm eventually going to let my genes down; we all do, just as they do us. At some point, I need to start training for the slowing, for the frustration of decline. It takes strength of a kind to bear that weight. The path for developing that strength is going to be laced with roots and studded with stones, but now and then I can foresee a time when I'll be able to pick my way through, follow rather than fight its ups and downs. It doesn't happen often, but training on those paths now, I can sometimes find solace in focus and forgetting, in solitude made complete by a four-count rhythm of respiration, the salt taste of sweat on my lip, the inexorable beating of the heart. There is no thought of a finish line, only of forward movement.

It's times like these that I think my trainer is right. Maybe there's still time for me. ☒



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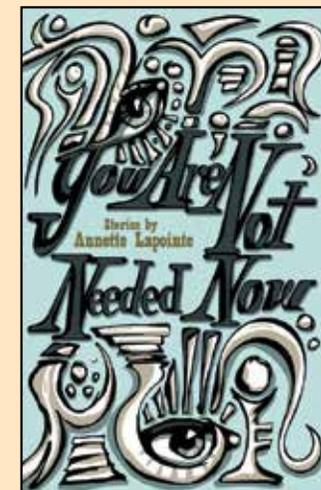


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