

My Morning Run Is A Moving Meditation

Competitiveness gets me out the door, but it's the peace I feel that keeps me pounding the pavement

BY PEGGY DUFFY

MY SISTER HAS LOST SEVERAL toenails over the years. "It's a consequence of running," she told me while recounting her latest training woes. She holds this fact up like a merit badge. She averages eight miles a day, unless she's preparing for a marathon. Then she ups her mileage considerably.

I average three miles a day, unless my Achilles tendon starts to ache. Then I average two.

I started running in earnest last spring after an acquaintance told me she'd been running about three miles every other day. She looked to be in her early 50s, about six or seven years older than me. She didn't appear athletic. I figured if she could do it, so could I. My sister became my phone coach. When I complained about having to stop on a particularly difficult hill, she said, "But next time you'll do it." Her words echoed in my head, and the next time I did do it.

When I was up to a steady two miles a day, my sister said, "In a year, you'll be a real runner."

So here I am. I wake one morning and feel my toenail catch on the sheet. I pull my foot out and see a bright pink flap sticking up from the side of my second toe. There isn't any pain. I push it back down, thinking that what is sticking up is just thick layers of nail polish. Later I realize it must be my toenail, because what lies below is the hard nail bed.

I clip the nail, put on my running clothes and go downstairs. I put on a clean pair of socks and lace up my sneakers. A few squats and stretches later, I am out the door. I walk to the corner, then begin to trot. My legs are tight, my knees stiff. I feel the muscles begin to warm up as blood is pumped into them. The first mile is the

hardest. I focus on rolling from my heel to the ball of my foot. At some point, my stride begins to loosen and elongate. My skin grows hotter, and sweat bursts through my pores like steam from a hot iron. My breathing quickens.



FEELING THE BURN: My skin grows hotter, and sweat bursts through my pores like steam from a hot iron

I run one of three routes every day and have come to recognize the familiar faces: the couples out for their morning stroll, the arm-swinging power walkers, the ubiquitous dog owners, the other runners. Our eyes meet as we pass; then we exchange smiles or nods or waves of the hand. I started running in a competitive spirit, but now it's more a meditative mode. I feel part of something larger—these other people, the road beneath me, the earthy green leaves that shade parts of my run, the verdant spikes of grass at the side of the street. I am removed from the physicality of my movements, musing to

the steady beat of my feet hitting the pavement, until I come to a rise in that pavement. Then I focus to maintain my speed, to keep my breathing even.

On weekdays I am out early, the sun still nestled beneath the rooftops of houses. On weekends I sleep later. By the time I run, the air is heavy and the sun beats down on my skin, heating up the beads of sweat that drip from my forehead, my chest, my arms. I wipe my eyes with the corner of my shirt, never breaking my stride.

A friend tried to interest me in a 5K, but I have no desire to run against a clock. At parties my neighbors mention seeing me run through rain, heat and humidity, as well as frigid winter temperatures. They've no idea how difficult it is to run in that icy morning air, the wind streaking my face, tears spilling from my eyes, their salty moisture solidifying on my frozen cheeks. Nor how discouraging it is to look out at the gloom of clouds and set off anyway. Then there are the days when the clouds open up and dump their contents just as I reach the point farthest from my house, and I have to make it back with cold pellets hammering down on me all the way.

It is on those days—the coldest and the wettest ones, when I am the only moving body on the streets, when even the dog walkers stick to the relative protection of their lawns—that my competitiveness surfaces and I gloat over my perseverance.

I complete the last rise of this so-familiar run, heading for the final downhill stretch. My skin glistens with radiant heat. I run my hand through my hair, slick with sweat. My shirt clings to me. I'm done. I squat and stretch my hamstrings, pull on my forever-taut Achilles. I bend my head, and globules of sweat

drop from my forehead onto the roadway, darkening the tar. By the time I stand, they have already begun to dissipate.

In the bathroom, I take off my sneakers and socks, lift my foot onto the edge of the sink and trim what remains of the nail close to the cuticle. I pull out the bright pink bottle of nail polish, paint the nail bed the same color as the adjacent toenails and lower my foot onto the tile floor. From this distance, it looks like all my other toenails.

I'm finally a real runner.

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