A Run with Two LOPAs

November 12, 2008

Last Saturday morning I drove down to the trailhead of the picturesque Peavine Trail in Prescott, Arizona. The plan was to do a long run – 16 miles - in order to decide whether to do the half or full Tucson Marathon in December. A bit late to be making that decision some of you may think, but with age comes nostalgia and nonsensical behavior. So off I went wearing a light 1988 Boston jacket to show those following that they were dealing with experience. I ran a gentle pace for the first 3 miles past the bird adorned Watson Lake and through the amazing granite outcrops. I had put a lot of ice in my water bottle that was made out of recycled plastic if you wish to know that. The ice was cold on this 30 degree morning so I had to shuffle it from hand to hand while wondering why I had succumbed to this strange American obsession of putting ice in all drinks. Perhaps it is time for the introduction or warm beer to these uncultured upstarts. At mile 3 the trail splits, one fork, the Iron King Trail, continuing four miles down to Prescott Valley and the other going straight for three miles until it is rudely interrupted by a highway. The plan is to continue to develop this old railroad on up to Chino Valley and beyond, and to send a branch for 40 miles all the way around Prescott. When finished this will be one of the Seven Wonders of the World’s trails. I put down my water bottle next to the mile marker, much to the relief of my frozen fingers.

I ran out one mile and then returned to the fork having paused to let a few antelope cross the trail. Rather antelope than the usual tarantulas, rattlesnakes and mountain lions. I glanced to my right at the turn and saw a couple of women about 100 yards away approaching at a fair lick. So I lengthened my stride so as not to be caught by mere girls, a disgrace that has become more and more frequent as time goes by. I paused at the first old railway carriage to park my water bottle again and the dainty duo caught up and passed me. The chattering had been getting closer as I ran this first mile along Iron King. When I started up again they waited for me and we passed a few pleasantries like my GPS tells me that we are doing 10.164 minute pace and it must have been exciting to run the Boston Marathon back in the day at the peak of the fitness boom. Eventually the chatter came to “what’s your name?” answered by Brian (that’s me), Christina with an ‘a’ and Romy which is short for Rose Marie. I have named these two runners the LOPAs – Ladies of Peculiar Aptitudes, using ‘peculiar’ in its correct sense of meaning unique rather than funny.

The first peculiar aptitude was that they had both run the Man against Horse race – not the wimpy 12 miler that I had done a few weeks ago, but rather the full 50 miles along sandy washes, stony paths and up the big Mingus Mountain. What is more Romy had actually won her age group with a 9 hour something time across the terrible terrain. Impressive! She is trying to qualify for Boston, again, so please reserve a tentative seat on the GNBTC bus. I realized that I was among mistresses of the art of running (MOTARs). They dressed the part with belts full of fluids and sustenance. After a while we were on the long downhill to the turn around and we got to chatting about this and that as runners do. It turned out that Romy was a post doc at UC Davis, with a PhD from Texas in plant biology with particular attention to peaches. She described herself as a taxonomist, which generated a lame response by me about stuffed animals. Romy politely pointed out that the classification of plants and animals is a worthy pastime, especially where DNA is used to improve the specificity and selectivity. I explained my vicarious expertise in this stuff by telling tales of my large carnivore biologist daughter who lives way up North.

The second peculiar aptitude was that belonging to Christina (with an “a”) Christina is a concert pianist and occasional music teacher. Her husband is an artist who puts up his tent around the Prescott Courthouse and sells beautiful art work, he too is a runner, but I was told, not much taken with training. Now the problem for pianists and painters is that they live at the mercy of the ungrateful consumer. The octogenarians who inhabit Prescott, AZ seem to think that artistic products are very nice but should be provided free of charge, like health care or voting rights. Christina does get quite a few gigs in formal settings, but has to rely on teaching, sometimes less than talented children. This provided me the opportunity to describe my first and only venture into music. I visited the teacher in my little village back in the 1940s for my second lesson. I failed miserably to remember the three or four notes so I was told to take the sixpence back to my mother with a note the she shouldn’t waste her money on a child that had no talent or work ethic. Who knows my talent may have been hidden and I may have become a Billy Joel (the piano man) or Scott Joplin or Liberace.

This musical conversation got the three of us up the long hill from Prescott Valley to the aforementioned branch in the Iron King and Peavine trails. We then got on to the topic of common acquaintances; by common I do not mean commoners or people of little culture, rather I mean mutual acquaintances. First there was Steve, a longtime member of the Mountain Milers, and then there were others, like Ken the organizer of our group, but by this time I was beginning to flag. “Did you read about the lady and the rabid fox?” said Romy. I had read the story. Last week this jogger was running around Granite Mountain when a rabid fox latched on to her arm. She grasped the fox by the neck, ran half a mile to the car pulled the fox off her arm and threw it into the trunk. She then drove to the ER, having contacted 911. When she got to the hospital one of the helpers there opened the trunk and also was bitten. The lab confirmed that the fox had rabies. The jogger had her injections. And that is a truly amazing story of the presence of mind and intestinal fortitude of Prescott joggers.

By this time we have a mile to go and I had to explain that one should always remember that the runner running next to you is hurting as much as you are. We had been averaging just over 10 minute miles for 16 miles, including the long hill up from Prescott Valley. We had shared most interesting stories, with barely a pause in the conversation. There is no doubt that I would have walked some without the company. Running buddies, even those serendipitous acquaintances on the trail, are the salt of the earth. What could be more fun than sharing stories with fellow runners on a clear Saturday morning on Prescott’s Peavine Trail?