Earth and Sky

September 9, 2003

Somewhere around the middle 1990s I was running in a race in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. It was either a half marathon or a 10k, I forget. Bloomfield Hills is an affluent suburb of Detroit with mature subdivisions, sliced by the mile roads from East to West, which are connected by a few North – South main roads and a bunch of dirt roads, which attract race directors. Anyway we were about three parts into the race, on a dirt road, when a long hill loomed. Like at Boston, the sadistic race directors place these hills strategically to catch the unprepared and those for whom negative splits have been negated by banana splits. I was chugging up this hill, minding my own business, when this young expert came up behind me and advised me of the merits of keeping my head up, pumping my arms and charging the hills. Now I have been running for many years with my unique incorrigible style, with mixed success and no injuries to speak of. So I listened politely to the advice of this young buck as he continued to explain his theories. Finally I explained that the reason I was richer than he was because of all the pennies, dimes and quarters I had found by keenly surveying the earth as I ran. In fact, I lied, I once found a ten dollar bill. I kicked his butt in the last half mile.

Recently I ran the Silver State Marathon, around a lake south of Reno, Nevada. It was probably the most scenic race I have ever experienced. We were surrounded on all sides by mountains, and to our right was always the shimmering lake. The start was at six o’clock to beat the heat of the day. For the first six miles we saw the increasingly ominous hint of the sun silhouetting the mountains to the East and bouncing off the underside of the clouds, creating a magnificent red aurora. As it was the first six miles, with a temperature of around seventy, but dry, my only complaint was the five thousand feet. So I ran with my head up and drank in the sky along with alternating swigs of water and sports drink. The rising sun brought me down to earth, which was covered with the asphalt of freeways and the dry sand of trails for much of the race. Much of the last three parts of the race was run in the eighties, which led to much surveying of the earth with only occasional glances at the mountains and sky.

I had a couple of strange running buddies in Michigan. One a professor of engineering who still does not know what kind of engineering to do – he’s a sort of mix between mechanical, civil, chemical and electrical. Vibrations are mechanical phenomena that affect civil structures that are made of chemicals and the whole shebang can be controlled by electrical feedback circuits. Now this is the only guy I know who stopped his watch during the process of tripping and falling in a twenty miler. He never listened to me when I warned him of the great importance of watching precisely which piece of earth was about to receive a blow from the next foot. The other member of our trio is a computer scientist. He’s a fanatic, who has about twenty marathons within a few minutes of the magic three hours. He is an efficient shuffler, but I have not seen him trip; he must be a surreptitious earth watcher. The shuffler and I lived twenty six point two miles apart, while the lanky watch stopper lived sort of in the middle but off to one side if you understand what I mean. We used to rotate among different routes, some in unfamiliar neighborhoods. These runs required navigational skills, like remembering where the sun rose and orienting ourselves accordingly. Unfortunately there was often confusion within this happy trio, especially when the early morning sky was overcast. On one occasion this led us across a private golf course where we learned the precise meaning of private – these golfers spend their lives looking at the earth and then into the sky (timing of these activities is critical, or so I am told, which is probably why I invented the scoot along the earth drive with a half decapitated ball, while I looked hopefully into the sky where the ball is supposed to be going), and simply don’t understand runners trying to beat their drives up the fairway.

Michigan, unlike Texas has hills and my favorite Michigan morning six miler has more than its fair share. Out of the house, up the lane, left on Silverbell, down into the valley, up the other side, down into the Paint Creek valley, right along the old railroad, now converted into a trail and then right on Dutton. Or rather that should read, right up Dutton Hill – a half mile monster which attracts the sadistic high school cross country coaches as well as the less gifted members of the Rochester Old Bull – Young Bull Running Club. Now I have introduced three members of this ragged bunch. The rest include a talkative 220 pound dentist, a retired school teacher, who has 70 marathons under his belt, a college professor who is more than three parts through the 50 states and a couple of automotive manufacturing engineers. The college professor was seen one day on his knees in the dirt, nose to nose with a ferocious hound, barking. There is no way that anyone can see much more than dirt while plodding up this vertical Dutton Hill slope, except that if you crick your neck you can see a little circle of light at the top created by the overhanging trees. This bunch of clowns is never short of a story, except when grinding up this mountain. The fools, dreaming of their long lost youth, like to race up Dutton Hill. There is no point; the pecking order was clearly established years ago, except on one occasion when we persuaded the dentist to try a 10-mile “English” short cut after a 12 miler. He crawled and whined. This gallant group can describe in great detail every nuance of the pile of dirt that makes up the infamous Dutton Hill. I forgot to mention that running brings on early senility or perhaps it is people with early senility that run. So one of the crowd was out one morning having failed to make adequate use of the bathroom before his run. He found a convenient pile of earth in the woods that turned out to be a hornet’s nest – the result was worse than you can ever imagine. And then there was the one who got blisters at mile eight in the famous Crim 10 miler; he took off his shoes and ran mile nine barefoot… and got even more blisters from the unforgiving earth.

The most prestigious event of the year for Michigan runners is the Great Lakes Relay – some two hundred and fifty miles across the state through backroads, blackroads and forests. Of the sixty or so teams of ten that compete in this event, the most famous is the Fox and Hounds, so named because of the fox and hounds. This team is old, fast and pretty and has won the last two competitions mainly because being old brings the wisdom not to get lost while youth and talent is wandering the woods looking around the earth and sky for signs of direction. But the team is not without its scoundrels, who have been known to drive their cars on the forbidden routes, only to get whacked with a big penalty. And its enthusiast – who attempted to accompany a team mate on a bike through the quicksand – and was late for the next leg. And the guy who lost his shorts at a changeover.

Texas, unlike Michigan, has no hills, except in the hill country, which is about ten days drive out West into the big sky. Texas, like Michigan, does have roads, which are made of asphalt or concrete linked together by potholes, placed strategically to trap the unwary sky watcher as he navigates his morning run by Venus, Mars or the more accessible Moon. Occasional half brained Texans use artificial hills, called bridges, to strengthen their legs, while risking their lungs and lives through inadvertent interactions with eighteen wheelers. Whereas Michigan has golfers for runners to contend with, suburban Texas has dog walkers. In the early morning dark it is not so much the dogs or even the dog walkers that runners have to deal with; rather it is the not working retractable leash between them that converts a training run into a hurdling exercise. The dog walkers don’t say “sorry for interrupting your stargazing and earth watching” they simply ignore the runners and say, “good dog sit”. “Good dog sit” is not a sentence and merits an even shorter response because they seldom explain to the dog where to sit and dogs being inventive creatures like to sit on the sky gazer’s feet.

One day, while I was out earth watching, I took a moment to stargaze for the purpose of checking on the behavior of Mars. Now at that precise moment, and I suspect collusion here between Earth and Mars, an earth bound pothole attacked my toe, which is connected to my body which was cruising along at a fair rate of knots, despite the lack of light. Newton was right when he pointed out that although toes have a habit of stopping in potholes, the much heavier bodies have a way of continuing on their merry way, before finding an equal and opposite reaction upon the earth beneath. Blood pouring profusely from knees, hips, elbows and wrists. But the resolute athlete rolled on the concrete, jumped up and continued earth watching and stargazing with more bias towards the former. Meanwhile a band of dog walkers said, in unison, “good dog sit.”

It has been noted that Michigan runners are none too bright, well the same goes for Texas runners. A couple of weeks ago after a fine hot 5k that turned out to be at least 6k because somebody moved the turnaround barrel, a dozen or so BARCERS ran four miles in four hours passing through nine bars. Three weeks earlier one of the bunch had run the famous Lunar Rendezvous Run in a pathetic 33 minutes; she gave birth, right on schedule, to a fine baby boy five days later. Her participation in the pub crawl was punctuated by pumping and dumping, having left junior temporarily with an understanding mother in law. The Lunar Rendezvous run was started by an astronaut with a loaded gun, or at least that was her story. Now rocket scientists are by nature meticulous about the details. This particular one who ran a three-hour marathon at age fifty does not take his mile splits, he takes his quarter mile splits on his four-mile circuit every day, at midday, in Houston, throughout the summer. Talk about mad dogs and Englishmen! Collectively this gaggle of sky dreamers are an obsessive crowd; the highlight of their year was when the overgrown bike path was paved; this required that they arm themselves with earth painting brushes and re-do the quarter mile markers in bold fluorescent green. We must not forget our intrepid 100 miler, who finished a recent ultra with his shorts on his head, leading to much tut tutting by the board members and a new morals clause in the race rules.

Some years ago, having moved from Michigan to Texas, I had the good fortune to compete in the Senior Olympics as a representative of Michigan in the triathlon and 10k. There is nothing more wonderful than seeing a ninety year old javelin thrower who can throw the javelin further than he can see. These competitions in 2001 were in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in July. Baton Rouge, Louisiana in July is hot and humid. Both my races were run at near one hundred degrees with a torn Achilles tendon, suffered a week earlier in the Bay Area Running Club Lunar Rendezvous Run. So much for excuses, the results were a tenth and a seventh. But the best part of the trip was talking to the ancient athletes. There was this tall seventy something, thin, Irish immigrant, who forty years ago had left his beloved peat bog and potato land to try Hollywood. We were having a midday barbecue after the 10k behind a local bar when Patrick stood up and with tears in his eyes told us what he loved most about America. Picture Kramer on Seinfeld. Patrick was driving on the I10 East of El Paso on his way to Baton Rouge early in the morning, just before sunrise. There was nothing but road and sky up front and the beautiful picture of a red sunrise. Patrick the eloquent, gazed up to the heavens and recited, “This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the Great Lake waters…” and so on – see Appendix for the runners’ anthem. He explained that this vision driving East on the I10 towards Baton Rouge, via El Paso, San Antonio and Houston, at dawn was the best experience that he had ever had and why he was proud to be an American, albeit of Irish origin. Then there was the octogenarian with two medals, one for winning the mixed doubles table tennis at these games and the other for getting second in the World championships in the same event in 1950. And another octogenarian, with a mixture of stars and tears in her eyes complaining that she had been beaten at the tape in the 5k when she thought she had the gold all wrapped up.

Running is about reaching for the stars, only to be brought back to earth on frequent occasions. Winning may be good for the ego, but losing is good for the soul. On average runners are a bunch of losers. The best coaching advice is to look where you are going.

The runner’s Anthem:

**THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND**

*Words and music by Woody Guthrie*

Chorus:

This land is your land, this land is my land

From California, to the New York Island

From the redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters

This land was made for you and me

As I was walking a ribbon of highway

I saw above me an endless skyway

I saw below me a golden valley

This land was made for you and me

Chorus

I've roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps

To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts

And all around me a voice was sounding

This land was made for you and me

Chorus

The sun comes shining as I was strolling

The wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling

The fog was lifting a voice come chanting

This land was made for you and me

Chorus

As I was walkin' - I saw a sign there

And that sign said - no tress passin'

But on the other side .... it didn't say nothin!

Now that side was made for you and me!

Chorus

In the squares of the city - In the shadow of the steeple

Near the relief office - I see my people

And some are grumblin' and some are wonderin'

If this land's still made for you and me.

Chorus (2x)

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