Hills

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Hills were created to torture runners and to beat them into submission. But the sturdy ones put their heads down, pump their arms and beat the hills. Some years ago I investigated some statistics associated with hills. I took runners’ Boston times and their qualifying times and compared the slope profiles with the objective of creating an index of hilliness. It transpired that, empirically, up hills do indeed slow you down much more (about 3:1) than the down hills help you. For the full details you can go to the Journal of the American Statistical Association sometime in 1993 or to Marathon and Beyond a year or so later. But statistics are boring and they don’t help you on the day, although they figure high on the excuse list after the race. The here and now of hills are more important, and their idiosyncrasies. Hills have personality.

I guess that my introduction to hills was Aldbrough Hill in Sproatley (pop 193), Yorkshire where I grew up. On top of the hill is perched the police station, a plumber, a row of cottages and a pub. We also had Church Hill on top of which were the village school, the church with vicarage and cemetery, a few cottages and the base of the local mobile hardware dealer. Now small children either run or walk depending on their mood at the time; the presence or absence of hills is irrelevant – they are just there, no big deal. Their main disadvantage is that the tennis ball that they kick all the way to and from anywhere has the nasty habit of escaping and rolling down the hill. The nearest big city Hull, had no hills to speak of, except a couple of bridges over the river Hull. In those days running was not in vogue although I do believe that there was a group that called themselves the Hull Harriers. The bridges did cause the six or seven abreast cyclists to push a bit harder and puff a bit. It should be noted that in those days bikes were preferred to busses, and cars hadn’t been invented.

My next move was to Hong Kong to serve in the Royal Air Force. Hong Kong has big hills that we would run over to get from our camp – Little Sai Wan, to Big Wave Bay. The paths were rough and somewhat snake infested, but we were young and the attractiveness of the beach at one end and the mess hall at the other allowed us to ignore the intervening slopes. Even in our late teens running was the most convenient method of locomotion. I revisited Hong Kong some sixteen years later as a lecturer at the Hong Kong University. There I was introduced to the Hash House Harriers, a motley crew. We charged around main streets and mountain paths and up and down the mountain sides and even up and down high rise buildings, just to get to the beer and hash house at the end of the Monday night ritual. On On! Even then hills were there just for fun and running up and down was not a battle, just part of everyday happenings.

From Hong Kong we travelled, via Australia, to Halifax, Nova Scotia. It was here that I decided to become a runner and attempt my first marathon. Suddenly hills became the enemy. There is a fort – the Citadel – perched on the top of a hill overlooking down town Halifax, the waterfront and the distant town of Dartmouth. My morning training took me up this hill and my dislike for hills was born. Unfortunately my longest run was two times round this eight mile circuit and my marathon time taught me another important life lesson – you get what you earn. It rained that day and I have a photograph of a bedraggled me carrying my daughter Caroline over the finish line with cars now competing for space on the road. A few months later I ran the famous Johnny Miles marathon – he held the Boston record for about 10 years in the 1920s or 30s. There were hills on this course and I was embarrassed by one of my students, a university basketball player, who passed me on a hill at mile 18 with a hearty back slap. It’s hard to be taken seriously when teaching biomechanics when one of the class members had just demonstrated biomechanical superiority.

One hill in our next stop in Norman, Oklahoma was a short one in Whispering Pines. Our house backed up to an occasional river three doors down from that of the football coach, an occasional jogger until hit by a car. The point of this hill was to get you out of breath within the first three minutes of your morning training run. It was here where I introduced the Hash House Harriers to members of the University and other citizens. We sought out other hills in and around the city, but none were particularly troublesome. Perhaps the most challenging hill was the one zig zagging its way up to the top seats in the stadium. Being a new faculty member I was assigned a pair of seats on the very top row and told that I would gain more appreciation of the intricacies of the game from this bird’s eye perspective. I was also told that my job was to help to develop a university that the football team could be proud of. It was from this minimal hill training that I attempted my second marathon around Dallas’ White Rock Lake where I shaved many minutes off my time, perhaps due to the stadium steps training.

Our move to Rochester, MI planted us on Dutton Road and the infamous Dutton Hill. Even though we moved after a couple of years I couldn’t escape this monster. But I met up with a bunch of runners and they explained to me the importance of hill training. We fought that beast most days. And we were rewarded with good times, both statistically and figuratively. Was it worth it? OK the marathon time (3.04) was as good as it was ever going to get but Dutton hill carved an indelible mark on my psyche. It was like sticking pins in those little effigies of your boss – every step up this ¾ mile hill was accompanied by an ungracious remark regarding the object of my scorn. To be accurate, it wasn’t actually my boss – I had a string of great bosses at GM. Rather it was usually their bosses, who on reflection were victims of the substantial pressures to build and sell, great cars and trucks. Perhaps they should have become runners – it’s a very good way of letting off steam, hills and all.

My 15 years in Michigan brought many marathons and many hills. The Detroit marathon hills were wimpy – over the bridge to Canada and then up out of the tunnel back into Detroit. But the reward for running fast enough at Detroit was qualifying for Boston. Now Boston has a substantial net downhill slope and the first 7 or so miles are all downhill, but the trouble starts at mile sixteen with the Newton Hills. The designer of this race some 110 years ago was a sadist. He placed these hills right when you thought you were comfortably going to beat that magic 3.00. And the hills won. To be fair there are a few downs between mile 16 and 22 but there are a lot more ups, culminating in the big up of Heartbreak Hill. Sometimes they place a news camera looking down from the top to capture the abject misery of the untrained. If you look in the background of these movies you will see a jovial group of Hash House Harriers at the bottom of the hill handing out beer to bolster the spirits of those who have sufficient breath to sound the battle cry – On On! The Newton Hills sort out the sheep from the goats, the boys from the men, the worthy from the unworthy. Sometimes the hill wins. It’s downhill all the way from mile 22. Or is it? By now you are tired, questioning your own sanity, saying ‘never again’ and cursing every bump in the road. Then comes the overpass. In normal circumstances one wouldn’t bat an eyelid at this gentle rise. But at this stage in the race it is a mountain. And you plod. At last you get over this challenge and try to regain your pride with a strong finish. Unfortunately in recent years these latter day torturers did it again. Instead of running straight for the turn into Boylston Street they send you down and then up through an underpass. Very unkind. But you survive and are presented with the greatest downhill in the world - along Boylston Street to the finish. The crowds, ten deep on either side of the road are cheering, the clock above the finish line is ticking, and all the runners around you have their heads up and arms in the air. You have finished the Boston, hills and all in 3.12.

One day a couple of running buddies of mine – Mike and Garry – suggested that we run a marathon in West Virginia. A very bad idea – just look at the map. The start was in a park and the hill went vertically up for a mile, and then you ran the next 25 miles, up and down, up and down, up and down. And I remembered my analysis – if a down gives you one, an up takes away 3. There are certain parts of the country those in search of a PR should avoid. But runners are fools. If race planners are sadists then runners are masochists. To prove my point I would like to take you to Houston Texas or more specifically to Kemah, Texas which recently was drowned by hurricane Ike. Members of the Bay Area Running Club are at face value a sane collection of rocket scientists and shoe salesmen - the On the Run running store is the focus of the BARC. They trot around Clear Lake Park and then around Nassau Lake and every year for a pub crawl along NASA Road 1, pausing ten times for a glass of beer. Run of the mill runners whose annual jaunt to the Houston marathon qualifies many of them for Boston? But secretly they are imbeciles. They seek out the Kemah Bridge at the crack of dawn and run up and down, backward and forward at least a dozen times. Now as bridges go this is a big one – it lets a large armada of boats out into Galveston Bay every weekend. And they enjoy the pain. “Let’s do another” they shout in glee. “No, let’s do three more” is the response. Flatlanders are fools, especially those who add hills to heat and humidity.

New Bedford, Ma. has some small hills, like up Union Street and the last mile in the Annual New Bedford Half Marathon along County Street. But these are no big deal. So my old buddy Don and I used to drive out into the countryside and do a few repeats up the biggest hill on the South Coast. The effort paid off in marathon times. But then I was suckered into going up North for a mountain race with the sprightly Don, who was full of confidence regarding his prowess, following creditable performance in similar races and a top ten finish at Boston. This was a five mile loop, repeated three times. Up and around and down a mountain. On trails. To cut a long story short (I shall be happy to give you the longer version if you have a couple of hours to spare), this was the time of Don’s comeuppance. The hills beat him and I beat the hills.

My daughter, Lily, lived in Reno, Nevada and invited me to join her in a local half marathon. I should have taken more notice of the race name – Escape from Prison Hill. I started out fast on the level track to the base of the hill and then up the gently sloping foothill. But then the real ascent started and I was passed by elderly ladies. And then daughter Lily went past with some disrespectful remarks. What goes up must come down especially when the finish and start of a race are at the same place. With two miles to go we hit level ground and trotted in together. Much to my relief.

Maybe I inherited some of this insanity from the Texas Posse. Earlier this year I decided to join a bunch of 20 year old ROTC cadets in the Annual Bataan Memorial Death March at White Sands, New Mexico. The main feature of this race is the mother of all hills – up a highway and then further up trails with loose sand for miles and miles and miles. And this after driving hundreds of miles from Prescott, AZ, and then fighting the wind and rocky ground to erect our tents. But there is more. These cadets and many other folk with a military bent believe that it is appropriate to suffer to really remember the survivors and victims of this horrendous World War II forced march in the Philippines. So they wear full military uniforms, boots and all. And then they carry a 35lb pack on their backs. They take anywhere between 6 and 12 hours to complete this marathon distance race. The blisters told the tale, but not as well as the faces of these undertrained and inexperienced cadets. They were so happy and proud of their achievement. They had come to understand the cruelty of hills.

Some runners are born great, some achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them, by hills.