

Runner

My feet were hamburger, my knees were a powder, my muscles were jelly. Everything below my waist had become an incredibly unappetizing kind of food. I was 25 miles in, and the sun was scorching my shoulders and neck. It was much hotter than I had thought it was going to be. It was southern Utah in the early summer, so I knew it would be toasty, but I hadn't anticipated this kind of choking dry heat. Although, I had trained for this. I knew this pain and had become familiar with my ability to respond and welcome it in. I had learned the ability to welcome the discomfort into my home and sit with it. To converse and familiarize myself with it.

But it felt different this time. Usually, at this point my breathing was my best friend. The more I breathed and focused on the pattern, the longer I could sit with my new friend named *Pain*. For some reason, this new friend was growing. He was beginning to take up more space in my body than he had ever done before. Before I knew it, he had taken up a permanent residence in almost every part of my body and truly made himself at home.

Salt. I haven't had nearly enough salt.

I could feel the muscle cramps marching their way towards me, just over the next hill or around the next bend. I reminded myself that what I focus on expands, and that the more attention I give to this new guest, the more he feels like he belongs. I now realized this was the real test. It wasn't the 26.2 miles. It was the new parts of yourself you found along the way and the new characters that insert themselves into your equation while you wrestle with yourself all along the route. Was I going to be able to continue? Or would I need to take a break, to forfeit all those stubborn, unforgiving seconds I had worked so hard to tuck away?

I looked up at Sam. He was just in front of me keeping the same pace but looked as smooth as butter. I knew he was feeling it, but he was not at all in the same place that I was. I knew he had welcomed in his pain, and it was comfortably sharing this ride with him. His breathing was steady, and each stride seemed confident and strong. I was fighting like hell to just keep up.

Breathe. Just breathe.

I began to focus again. In for two paces, out for three. In for two, out for three. Then eventually in for two, and out for two. I only had a mile and a half to go. Would I have gone the whole while to crash and burn in the very end? One mile out of 26 may seem small, but to walk half of that would be detrimental to my time. I needed relief, although the breathing was helping. I was beginning to relax. I had begun to calm myself down and return to my baseline, but I was still pushing harder than ever. Each step down felt like a jackhammer on my knees. I had developed blisters on the outside of my big toe, and it felt like someone was stabbing a knife into them. Chafing had welcomed itself into my armpits and on the back of my lats where my arms brushed my skin, it felt like I had an open wound.

Just keep breathing. Just keep breathing.

I was doing my best and was gaining control, but slowly Sam began to pull away. At first, he was only about 10 feet ahead, but that space slowly grew. 20 ft, 30, 40, then people started to fill in between us. Was I slowing down, or was he speeding up? It was almost impossible to tell. Sam somehow realized that I wasn't immediately behind him, and he glanced back. He now saw that I was about 100 yards behind him. In this final stretch, this was when I expected him to say that we are all on our own, and that it's almost the end. But no.

Before I knew I was passing him as he walked along the side of the road, and once I caught back up, he resumed running with me, but this time from behind. I knew how much his time meant to Sam. This was my first marathon, and he was the one who got me to join. This was his hobby, his passion. He was in the process of qualifying for other races and pushing himself further.

“C’mon! You got this! Welcome the pain! You’re the boss! It’s only here for a minute! I’m proud of you! I’m proud of you! You’re pushin’ me! You’re the one pushin’ me! Let’s go let’s go let’s go!!”

It’s truly amazing the effect friends can have on each other, because it was precisely in that moment that I realized I could keep on going. Breathing, Sam, perseverance, it was almost the end.

Just then, and I will never know what it was, but something wrong happened in my next step and I rolled my ankle harder than I ever have.

“Fuck!!”

It took everything in me to keep myself from diving to my belly. If someone had told me that I’d been shot in the ankle, I would have believed them. I hobbled to the side of the road to get out of the way, thinking that this was it and that Sam was going to have to push on without me, but Sam had other ideas. Right then I could feel Sam’s hand grab my wrist and pull my arm over his shoulder.

“You ain’t stoppin’! You’re not getting’ off that easy! Let’s go let’s go! You got this!”

Sam was practically carrying me to the finish line, throwing away his finish time to help me salvage mine. Our sticky, salty skin rubbed and pulled at each other's with every bound, adding to the pain from all the spots that had been rubbed raw and doused with salt.

“Don't stop! Don't stop! We're almost there! Only about a mile left! What is that?! Eight minutes?! You can do that! Eight minutes of pain! C'mon motherfucker! C'mon!”

Sam's energy was unrelenting and unstoppable. I wondered to myself if the water he had drank at the last rest station was different than the water I had drank, but I knew there was no difference. We had both consumed the same kinds and amounts of food and received the same amount of sleep for the last three days. One would like to say that he had a leg up in some way or another, but I knew this was not the case. I knew his leg up was in his mind. It was no leg up that I could not create for myself. It was no advantage that I couldn't receive as well.

“Yeeewww!! That's what I like to see! This is how we do! C'mon c'mon! Don't stop! Don't stop! We're almost there! You're the man! The man don't stop!”

People were beginning to pass us left and right. Although we were still running, we were unable to keep our same pace and in the final stages when one might receive extra motivation to push on, we were experiencing near failure.

I looked down to find my ankle swollen like a baseball. My shoe was beginning to feel tight, and I couldn't tell if it was numb or painful all over from the running or the accident. It's an odd mixture within your body where your nerves don't quite understand what's going on, if they've been fried or if they're being saved from the feeling of being fried.

I was still hobbling along, putting minimal weight on my injured foot, but I was still pushing on.

“Yo! You good?! You alright?!”

I was barely able to muster the strength needed to nod my head and let out a wheeze of conformation.

“Alright then bitch! Let’s get it! Let’s go let’s go! We’re there! We only have a little bit left! C’mon! Push yourself! You’re the man!”

In the distance I could hear cheering and shouting as I knew people were celebrating the end of their journey. The ultimate tease. The knowledge that relief was so close but without being visible, didn’t really exist. Finally, we rounded a corner and saw it all. The blow-up arch to run under, the crowds behind the gates, the vendors, food-trucks, and pop-up canopies. There were trees with pods of runners laying beneath them in the shade, and endless rows of plastic tables with cups of water and Gatorade, energy-chews and gels, and some with cold wet towels.

“You see that motherfucker?! You see that?! Let’s go! We’re right there! C’mon boy, c’mon!!”

The cheering, whistles, bells, horns, and clapping began to thunder louder the closer we got. It felt like I was running into the colosseum. It felt like I was running into battle. It felt unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. I felt like my shoulder was about to be pulled out of its socket from Sam helping me along, my ankle was about to burst, my lungs felt as if lava were in them, and my shoulders had a blanket of fire on them. I felt like falling into a pool of ice water. I felt like sleeping for the rest of my life. I felt I couldn’t ever repay Sam. It’s an interesting thing; the emotional state that pushing your body can bring you to. We were nearing the end when I realized I had tears running down my cheeks. These were not tears of pain, but

instead they were tears from Sam. Not much can explain it. My best friend had given up what he cared about and did whatever it was to help me.

He was there for me in a way I wasn't even for myself. It's the closest example of true altruism I can think of. It's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me.

“Hell yeah! Here we go! We did it! Let's go damn it! Whooooooooo!!”

We crossed the finish line and came to a slamming and truly grinding halt. Sam guided my one-legged self over to a tree with no one under it yet and threw me down onto the grass.

“Let me go get us some water.”