

 Commentary

Smart people don't run



ILLUSTRATION BY FRANK NEUFELD

BY DAVID SMITH

I have almost always associated universities with long-distance running, and this is, probably, why I also associate them with pain, sweat and hard work.

Growing up in Sudbury, Ont., I was on my high school cross-country running team. Most of our workouts were on the hilly, wood-chipped trails that surround Laurentian University. After practice, the coach would remind us if we kept up our training we might one day make the Laurentian varsity running team. Looking back on it now, this goal seems quite small given some of those young runners eventually became Olympians.

When I started my undergraduate studies at Acadia University, I ran for miles along the flat, grassy dykes of Wolfville, N.S. I never competed on Acadia's varsity team, but running helped me to overcome homesickness, anxiety from exams and the odd hangover. My quick legs also saved me from missing those early morning classes when I woke up at 8:29 a.m.

As a PhD student in genetics at Dal-

housie University, I ran every day along the Halifax waterfront or through the twisting trails at Point Pleasant Park. In addition to helping offset the long hours I spent at the lab bench and the library, these solitary runs were great for pondering genetic theories, planning experiments, drafting papers and preparing my Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Indeed, I owe about one third of my thesis to the steep, arduous hill that goes through the middle of Point Pleasant Park.

But the hills and academic challenges only grew larger when I moved to Vancouver for a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of British Columbia. The lab was large and highly competitive; the rain-forest trails that engulfed the campus were endless and steeped in mist. I was out of my league and, for a short while, I lost my sense of pacing. I ultimately had to relearn the golden rules of both distance running and research: pace yourself, stay level headed and never start sprinting when the start gun goes off.

These days, I run along the Thames River in the mornings before going to work at Western where I am an

assistant professor of Biology. When the weather is bad, I run on a treadmill at the Western Student Recreation Centre. Sometimes an undergraduate student on the treadmill beside me will lean over and say "Nice pace, Professor Smith!" But more often, my running neighbour asks a complicated question about second-year genetics, which leaves me gasping for air and adds further volume to my pool of sweat on the gymnasium floor.

Like my ongoing journey through academics, I have had a lot of setbacks with running. Injuries have sidelined me for weeks or months. There have been long periods when I have lacked all motivation to run and wanted to give it up for another sport or hobby. I can say with the certainty of an evolutionary geneticist that my stocky 5-foot, 6-inch frame was designed for anything but running. But also, like with academics, I carry on. I keep chugging along through the trails, up the hills and beside the tarmac. I keep finding new meaning and purpose for lacing up my sneakers and wearing

I still contemplate the mysteries of science while running. I still draft man-

uscripts and grants and plan experiments while I ratchet up the miles. Recently, I have also been finding myself practicing lectures during long runs. As I dash through forests and residential neighborhoods, and as the sun beats down on my brow, I picture PowerPoint slides and imagine witty ways of introducing the finer points of microbial genomics. Occasionally, I lose focus, trip on an old tree root, and the lecture dissolves away.

And, every now and then, I still work on that Nobel speech – but the odds of it being heard in public are about the same as me winning the Boston Marathon.

So, if you spot a short, bearded and bookish man in a fluorescent singlet and shorts waving his arms and talking to himself as he jogs through Gibbons Park, then put up your hand and say: "Hang in there, Dave. Only a few more kilometres left." **WN**

On April 18, David Smith ran the Boston Marathon for a third and (he swears by all that is holy) final time. He came No. 710 out of 30,741 runners in a time of 2 hours and 53 minutes.



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