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Henrik's Guide to Running

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“I can't offer much advice about what I do.”

Henrik took a big hit off a joint. It helped clear his mind and assisted in the long periods of silence he would endure throughout the run.

“The act of running, and getting more enjoyment from it.”

He adjusted his headband in the rearview mirror and got out of his car. He walked over a footbridge and began running.

“I never warm up.”

He ran at full pace. The terrain was obvious and familiar and he stared straight ahead at the slightly bending curve that drifted to the right as railing posts laserbeamed by.

There was no music and the distant landmarks were merely a context for his understanding of a passage of time. He ran until he stopped, and upon finishing, walked back to his car and drove to a nearby bar for an appointment.

“Find a place to run. This is probably the most important thing to understand about the passage of time. Early in my career, I would literally open the door of my house and off I went! This was really a foolish methodology, this running in a loop-like pattern.”

“You were a neighborhood exerciser, not a runner,” Sheila finally spoke. She was sitting at a small wooden table near the bar with Henrik.

“Yes, in those days, I always ran on the sidewalk,” said Henrik. “That wretched sidewalk!”

Henrik was having a cold pilsner beer and wearing a metallic blanket. His shoes, fresh from running, were on the table, and Sheila inspected them.

“How do the shoes fit? They are working properly?”

“Not bad,” said Henrik.

The bar was mostly vacant in August so no one seemed to care about shoes being on the table. The waitress didn’t give a damn.

“Running on the sidewalk is probably the worst place to run. That’s how you get injured. I stopped getting injuries as soon as I stopped running on sidewalks. The terrain changes so abruptly. Roots, cracks, pot holes, mailboxes, trash cans, rocks, trees and—fat fuckers! In both directions. Wobbling up and down, usually with children on a leash.”

“That’s a lot of data to analyze.”

“The brain simply cannot analyze terrain like this without directly affecting the mind-body connection to running. When you are always taking measure of your environment, your stride and gait will suffer, all from this running about on uneven ground. If time is a constant, then so must be the terrain.”

“And what of these people who call it fun to avoid these obstacles?” said Sheila.

“They are soon in the hospital!” shouted Henrik. Sheila was ripe for all the proselytizing. “Many people don’t like running. They find it difficult. Sweaty. An injury-prone activity. I’ve heard all the excuses. ‘I’d rather vacuum my house than run,’ they say.”

Henrik thought for a moment and continued. “I like to always be moving. Running provides that at an ultimate minimalism. He motioned to the shoes, which Sheila now had in a plastic bag. I could run barefoot, even naked in a field. I’m nude and just like that, I am running!”

“A field?” Sheila said. “I thought you only ran on smooth, even pavement.”

“Wherever you are, begin moving quickly. You are soon running. If I am forced to run on an uneven street I will. But I choose not to.”

“The shoes then? They are not working?”

“I think my form is improving but I’m not convinced it is from the shoes.”

“Perhaps you need to make an adjustment. You need to analyze more data,” said Sheila.

Henrik didn’t care to talk business or science. He started reminiscing about interactions with cyclists.

“One time, on my walk back, there was a puddle in the path that covered the entire right lane. I stepped to the left of it just as a cyclist yelled, ‘Behind you!’ I stepped back to the far right only to hear sounds of distress and mechanical unsteadiness, followed by ‘Shit!’ and then a bike wheel caught me in the back of the calf. I didn’t fall but the guy on the bike did. We steadied ourselves and cussed each other out. I told him about the pedestrian’s right of way. ‘You see a man walking around a puddle, you slow down!’ I yelled. He had these big leather bags draped over the back, some sort of courier.”

“‘Behind me’ tells me nothing about which direction you are approaching from,” Sheila interjected.

“Yes, exactly,” said Henrik.

“But why were you walking?”

The waitress arrived with a plate of enchiladas and Henrik got right into them, ignoring Sheila's question while he recharged his body.

Henrik polished off the beer. “Ahhhhh!” he said with hearty refreshment. “I always walk back!” Henrik wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I will simply focus on the mechanics of running. My arm position, my neck, and back. Which muscles I'm pushing on with my leg. You continue despite the anguish. As you tire, you look for shorter and shorter goals. Long-term goals are forgotten to serve the needs of the present.”

“And the shoes provide a sense of balance,” said Sheila.

Henrik glanced at the shoes, careful to not succumb to her ploy.

“Keep your form up, don't rest your arms, just try to walk normal, and endure the exhaustion. It will pass.”

Sheila was fond of endurance theories. They left the bar together and walked outside. Henrik was putting this all together for a book about running.

“It is difficult to maintain a repetitive muscular motion for long periods without tiring. If you study swimming, they have a variety of strokes. Many people don't know there are such things for running too.”

“Surely you have never done the butterfly while running.”

“No, but I have used this approach. If I become exhausted, for instance, I will transfer the mechanics of the run onto a different muscle group. Focusing the energy to my glutes or incorporating hamstrings or calves. Lowering or raising my center of gravity by changing my hand positions.”

They arrived at a set of stairs leading up. Sheila became melancholy and recounted a story:

“I was once injured on a set of stairs. A man such as you was running down the stairs and his hurry caused me to lose my balance. At once I fell and was incapacitated for three weeks, unable to work at the discotheque.”

Henrik snapped.

“I am not like that man! I have just told you of my disdain for abruptly uneven terrain. I enjoy inclines at all gradual angles, steep even! But never at ninety degrees in perpendicular repetition!”

Sheila smiled and they walked again until they reached a busy intersection. Cars honked and they breathed in the exhaust.

Henrik pointed to the green light just now changing red and a jogger approaching. The jogger stopped at the curb and ran in place.

“Look, he is timing his pace to match patterns of traffic and now he must wait. That man is a fool. The hand of time has stopped for that man.”

Henrik yelled and made insulting hand gestures at the jogger.

“Slow your pace to a near limp if you have to—but never do you stop to tread water!”

He and Sheila began to beckon the man across the street. The jogger didn't see them. Sheila was passionate and Henrik became more agitated.

"Look at the tremendous cramp he must have for running like that," said Sheila.

The light turned green and the jogger continued on his way.

Henrik yelled at the jogger. "Not in all of the land have I ever seen such a thing!"

Henrik walked with Sheila and continued with his lamentations. "Why didn't that man switch directions at the light? Go right or left like a stick tossed about in the current or a game of Pac Man out of control."

They made their way back to the bar where they had earlier sat.

"We must stop all this running in loops. If we are to run past the same things, we might as well be on treadmills," said Henrik.

"Turning around, going back. This is different then?" Sheila was perplexed.

"As long as no one sees you turning around, no one will ever know from which direction you came," said Henrik. "Walk the whole way back and process all that has passed in reverse. You will see the plants growing out of cracks and a duck flapping its wings over the water."

"You process them almost in a dreamlike state as you pass things in a blur?"

"As you near the end you will find a way to summarize your evaluation of it. If you started slow, finish fast."

Sheila had learned so much. She waved goodbye as Henrik departed in his Volvo.

"Running is difficult but you are always in control. No matter how good you get you can always go faster and further."