

run gently out there

by john morelock

Deadlines create a certain level of pretend in some of my writing. We have just watched a beautiful October sunset over the Olympic Peninsula. The sun still has almost two months of southerly travel before winter solstice. By the time this column reaches you, some of you will be looking at snow and ice, trying to figure out a way to get in some miles. Others will reach for a jacket or a long-sleeve shirt before heading out the door. And our readers from south of the equator will laugh in the warmth of spring as they read of our plight in our northern winter.

Gloves are now in the pocket of my windbreaker every day, just in case I have misjudged the wind direction. I would much rather have a jacket that turns out to be unneeded tied around my waist than to suffer the misery of against-the-wind runs. Today, as we shuffled along, we were talking of the upcoming hibernation period, the drop in intensity of effort on our daily outings, of the invitation to rest that the long nights of winter extend to us. Just as so many of us have a taper regimen for upcoming races, so too do some of us have a plan for a yearly refreshing of the mind, body, and spirit – if we can only find time and are willing to rest.

Somewhere along the way, on the trails or roads where we run and train and race, in our sport that knows no seasonal bounds, a time to rest will arrive, acknowledged or not. Even the iron-willed runners, those people whose names you seem to see or read about on every page of results in *UltraRunning* or online or in local newspapers, must pause or else slowly start the inevitable downward spiral caused by physical fatigue and emotional burnout. That pause can come, maybe ought to come, with the season's turning; the opportunity for that pause is a gift of winter.

Pausing to rest seems so foreign to us, but each and every one of us, from the leaders racing down from Hope Pass or across No Hands Bridge to those who wander trails and byways barely beating cut-offs, eating more brownies than gels, naming animals and plants as they extend conversations over hill and dale, can benefit from reduced levels of effort.

Rest has never meant becoming the protectorate of the couch; it only means decreasing the effort level, changing the emphasis from one of continual challenge to one where aching joints and muscles finally get to quit cringing from inner voices talking about an upcoming race or one more fartlek or one last mile in an all-out sprint down the hill.

Believing in rest, its need and its benefits, is not easy for us. The discussions over taper – two weeks or three – are related to our fear that fitness will go flying out the door if we don't go out that same door, shoes laced and intentions serious. My first serious encounter with rest was as the Avenue of the Giants marathon approached. It was my first year of running, my third marathon, the second having been just three weeks earlier. My legs were dead. My mind was shot.

While the latter is not unusual, the former was troublesome. What could be wrong? I thumbed through my then-meager library of running books, finally finding some thoughts on rest.

Whoa, I could rest completely for the next four or five days and still be able to run a marathon? Right, yeah, sure. Aching knees helped with the decision. A mile or two of beach walking on the way to the redwoods and another mile or two amongst the giants was the most I did that week. I don't know if it was the magic of running beneath their limbs and branches or if it was the rest, but the marathon went well that morning, capping a week with five days of no running. I extended this idea to a week or so of walking, some shuffling, maybe a little jogging, but no running, as the following winter passed. I slowly learned (high skull-thickness factor) that rest was okay, was useful, was maybe even important, a tool to be included in the training toolbox. Winter is a good time to look through the toolbox to see which tools are in need of replacement, improvement, or discarding altogether, a good place to put rest for use later in the year.

So here we are at the onset of winter. The days are shorter, the air colder, the skies grayer. Everything else is slowing down and still we ask, no, we demand that our mind's eye see the roots and rocks and twists and turns, we argue with our mind to get out the door, to go faster, to go longer, to remind us to drink as we go along the trail.

Winter fights back with trails covered with leaves to skip through or with frosty mornings turning grassy trail sides into glistening diamonds that find us pausing just for a moment, then for a relaxing day, or two or ten. A leisurely Saturday morning spent as a volunteer trail guide exposed a desire in me to learn about berries and bugs and fogs, bushes and trees and tides. A book about astronomy turned night runs into classrooms. Nature's mysteries unfolded.

For some of us it is finding the phrase "active rest" that permits a lessening of intensity. Active rest lets the body enjoy exercise without the jarring and jolting of running. It is not cross-training; cross-training is quite often at just as high a stress level as running. Active rest gives you time to relax, skip stones or count waves, not count repetitions.

I have long used the migratory patterns of birds to decrease intensity of training. An active-rest day was a good excuse to go to a wildlife refuge for a walk to see a different kind of ultramarathoner – birds of various sizes that fly hundreds or thousands of miles as the seasons shift.

There is a paradox in these southbound travelers. They are in a hurry to get to southern feeding grounds, but their passage foretells of slower days for me, days of rest and rekindling of spirit while I await their return.

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Joe Carrara of Charlotte, Vermont, running through spectacular autumn colors at the Vermont 50s
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