

EARN YOUR WORKOUT

...OTHERWISE, HARD WORK IS THE LAZIEST THING YOU CAN DO

by Eric Henderson

I started on the 6-mile loop of New York City's Central Park needing to finish a 36-minute run. I was still fairly new to running, training for my third marathon in a year and a half, having jumped straight from couch to the street after watching the New York Marathon in 2000.

If you begin at a spot called Columbus Circle running counterclockwise, you'll start out flat for about three miles, then go downhill for about a half-mile, then uphill in a major way for another half-mile, and finish in a flat-to-downhill reward during which you should be gritting your teeth and gunning for your target.



It turns out that on this day I felt really, really good and decided to push the pace early. I knew I had a 35-something in me. Felt good until I hit the uphill. That wasn't the biggest issue. I know that hill as a good friend and knew that I could talk my feet right through it. So, I killed the hill...I thought. The subtler, latter part of the incline took its toll. I ran slower.

I ended up running to save the workout, well off pace, knowing that I would have to fight to get to 36:30.

36:35. Hmm...not a major defeat. I mean, it was still a workout and I had many miles to go before the race. It was, however, a humbling lesson that propelled me to more disciplined training and directly into the 2 hr 54 minute marathon I was aiming for.

I knew my training goals were correct, but I should have followed them *exactly*.

But, what I tried to do was cheat, take the lazy way out. No, I did not have a conscious cheater's mentality. In fact, it was the complete opposite, but that doesn't change what it was - cheating.

Now how in the world was pushing the pace cheating???

The simple answer came to me at the end of that workout:

I had not yet earned the right to work that hard.

Running a faster time than planned assumed a different base level of training. This assumes a different body, one that I *had not built yet*. I listened to a *feeling*, instead of to the consistently overlooked higher calling - OBEDIENCE.

Whether you feel like a moldy tree sloth or like a cheetah in hot pursuit, Obey Your Goals, no matter what. Obedience means that on bad days, you keep pace and don't quit. On good days, you keep pace and do your job. If you've set the right goals (that is, they're tough but realistic), then your improvement will come.

Still, I imagine that this thought could cause some disagreement. Why not push yourself whenever you can? It's the temptation of any real competitor. But there's a little proof to help the case, and I think I hear the voice of a one-time ITB (iliotibial band) injury sufferer saying Amen!

This injury lurks for runners of any level, but beginners are prone to bring it on unnecessarily with work habits guided largely by intuition. "If I feel good, I should go for it." For example, could the following person be you?

You have just discovered the joy of running. You might even be fairly good at it. Shortly, you proceed to blister into a volume of running that is only cut short by a nagging, super sharp pain on the outside of your leg, right where your knee bends. You can run for a few miles, but then it comes back again, sharp and strong.

You've run too many miles, too soon, too fast. Injury, ITB syndrome in this case, is a common result of this triple threat.

If you want to be a better runner, you must take the TIME to earn your workouts. You earn them by following your plan. Consistent hard work can't be cheated or defeated by bursts of hard work. The tortoise and hare told us that a long time ago. Here's another cliché, often tossed around a bit carelessly as a way to say, "Ease up!":

Train smarter, not harder.

It should now be clear that this in no way implies less effort. It requires more. Being smarter means that you must respect time...and put in sustained hard work over time. That takes a big effort on your part.

Shamefully, I admit to being ITB-man, too, but I was blind to the lesson then, preferring to think of it as more of a stretching problem than that of overworking. I nearly ended my marathoning for good as the injury became severe.

Now, I'm back having a blast on the road...thankfully, with just a scar to left of the injury.

You won't come close to that type of drama if you keep in mind that each workout is actually a reward you've earned for the previous one done correctly. The next levels of strength, endurance, and pain (the right kind) will come to you. Life lessons abound here, but I'll leave those for you...as you take the long way home.