

Hill Country Outdoors Running

by Steve Ramirez

33,000 SOULS STOOD TOGETHER IN THE EARLY MORNING COLD.

I stood there too. Every few minutes the command would come for another wave of us to launch ourselves forward like trench warfare soldiers into an uncertain future. As our echelons' turn came to pass, we received the order and dutifully took our first steps across the line of no return. Today would be the culmination of eight months of training. They were months of rising before the sun and running... always running through the trails and roadways of the Texas Hills. Today, my running partner and I would run our first Marathon. 26.2 miles... just like life, each mile was conquered one step at a time.

When our turn came to step forward for our bid to complete the Inaugural San Antonio Marathon we did so slowly. This would turn out to be the same pace that we would use to cross the finish line many miles and hours into the future. We had learned that a wise runner who is not an elite athlete starts slowly and builds with each step. At first a marathon is all euphoria and expectation. The music plays from the sideline bands, the people cheer you forward, and the water stations stack up one after another. As we passed the Alamo and continued on through the city that holds its spirit we were caught up in the energy of what would prove to be one of the toughest and most important events of our lives. For the first 10 miles there were so many runners that I couldn't help laughing at the similarity between us and the extras in the old Japanese monster movies. I looked quickly over my shoulder for a giant lizard with flaming breath or flying killer turtle. There were none. Just north of downtown my running buddy Kristy and I had a good laugh at a stray dog that had chosen that moment in time to try to cross the road. He stood there at the roads' edge looking back and forth in total amazement as if wondering, "Who are all these people, what's chasing them, and where in the hell are they all running?" During the first 10 miles, we could still laugh.

At about the 11 mile mark the half marathoners turned off toward Hemisphere Park and soon we found ourselves among sparse company. Somewhere around 16 miles, the effort began to get more serious. The pain in our legs grew along with the exhaustion, and each step became a greater test of our resolve. These are the times that mimic life most. Even if you run with a partner and are surrounded by fellow runners and well-wishers you really are running alone. You begin to take stock of yourself; running inside yourself, defining who you really are. It has been said that it is in adversity that we are defined. I would add that it is through conquering adversity that you can feel truly alive. It's not the finish line that matters; it is each step.

With each step and each passing mile marker I thought of when I first began this journey. My first 5k run seemed so long ago. Being a former jarhead I arrived way too early. By the time the announcer called for runners to go to the line I found myself naturally in the front...not because I could run fast, but just because I was there first. A hush came over the growing crowd as I heard my fellow runners declare, "Look, here come the Kenyan." I watched as several people picked him up over the side railing and set him down at the front of the starting line. When the announcer called for us to "get ready" everyone around me hunched down and grabbed their high tech GPS running watches. I was in the wrong crowd. As the starting pistol sounded the crowd rushed forward and I set

into a nice pace just behind a big guy with a shaved head. I felt good as we rounded the first turn. It was then that the idiot in me took hold. I thought to myself, "If I can just draft behind this guy and keep this pace, I should do pretty well." Within a half mile it became apparent to my brain what my 48 year old legs already knew...I could not keep up with Rambo. At the one mile mark the track timer looked at me and called out 7 minutes, 14 seconds. The idiot kicked in again as I thought, "hey I'm doing pretty well for a beat up old jarhead!" It was then that I hit the first small hill and began to slowly die. Over the next few minutes that felt like hours I managed to toss water up my nose instead of where I was aiming and be passed by a stunning young blonde woman who was pushing a baby stroller at the speed of light. I was humbled but persistent as I sprinted in the last 50 yards across the finish line.

The point is I had fun. Everyone cheered me in just as they had the Kenyan who arrived over 12 minutes in front of me. Runners are as a group some of the nicest people I have ever known. It does not matter if you road race or trail run or both as I do, everyone is helpful and accepting. There are great organizations that surround the Texas Hill Country where you can learn about training, equipment and events. I train with Carroll Voss' "Fleet Feet Sports." I don't think anyone can find a better person to support them in their running endeavors than Carroll. Other good running shops in our area include "Run Gear Run" and "Roger Solar Sports." The San Antonio Road Runners' (SARRS) web site gives a great deal of information as does the Austin Areas' Hill Country Trail Runners.

I can't think of a better place in the world to jog or run than our beautiful Texas Hill Country. Our roads roll through pecan and oak covered passages. Our trails call to you offering adventure and beauty at every turn. And, the best thing is that all you need is to get on the road or trail with a decent pair of running shoes...and step forward. If you have never defined yourself as a "runner," or, "it's been a long time," no worries! Just start with walking a few minutes and running a few minutes until you build up to confidence and ability. It is so worth it. The reward is found in the crunching of crushed granite under foot, the building of friendships, your lungs full of Texas, and in time a feeling that you are not just sitting around watching life pass you by. We only get so many heart beats. We need to use them wisely.

I love trail running. It combines the benefits of running with my love of the outdoors. The Texas Hill Country has more great trails than you will ever have the time to complete. Our State Parks have some of the best opportunities and several San Antonio and Austin Area City Parks reach out into the Hill Country.

The Texas Hill Country is a runners' paradise. The road races can be jogged with friends, memories made, and life lived. Everybody wins when you run your own race. In the end, you do "get the tee shirt," but more importantly you feel a part of something worth while. The trails are opportunities to feel physically alive at your own pace all the while witnessing great rocky vistas, wildflower and cactus blooms, and wildlife at every turn.

When I was a Marine overseas I had a Gunnery Sergeant who could have been the prototype for the Clint Eastwood character Gunny Highway. He ran us six days a week. On Sunday we rested because Gunny said God was a Marine. One sunny day he ran us for hours and at the end of the ordeal he said, "Well Marines, you just ran your first Marathon." I was 23 years old and it was a tough run. Now at 48 I found myself plodding steadily past each mile marker. In time I could see the outline of the Alamo Dome and the oncoming finish line. I was exhausted. As we rounded the final turn Kristy called out, "come on Marine, we made it!" With my last ounce of energy we sprinted side by side across the finish line and straight toward a couple of ice cold beers and some jalapeno con queso burgers! Life is good. ✕
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