

Leaving our comfort zone



There is no question that as racers we often get stuck in a rut, logging the same number of miles each week, running the same routes and competing against the same people week after week. While routine can be a good thing it can also lead to boredom. Every now and again it's fun to mix things up a little and leave our comfort zone for a while. One of the easiest ways to do this is to tackle a new challenge.

Every year I take a trip home to Scotland and I always embrace the opportunity to participate in a race while I'm there. After carefully studying the race calendar this year I found an event mid-April that sounded interesting -- a 10K at the Glenlivet Distillery in The Cairngorms National Park, described as the most beautiful run in Scotland. I immediately signed up. It was just as I was hitting the confirm button that I remembered scenic is the Scottish word for hilly, and a mild panic set in. Fortunately, the race took place at the end of my two week stay, which gave me the chance to acclimatize and practice a little hill training on my sister's farm in Auchtermuchty.

On race weekend we decided to travel to the area a day early to enjoy the scenery and assess the terrain. Traveling on narrow roads in the rugged Cairngorms is an adventure in itself and offers travelers some spectacular views. We frequently stopped to take photographs, but they don't do justice to the beauty of the area. (Photos are from the Scotland trip)

After checking in to our Bed and Breakfast in the quiet village of Tomintoul, we headed out to the distillery, which was about 10 miles away. We enjoyed a tour of the facility and a wee dram of whisky, then drove the route I would be running. I immediately realized this would not be a PR course thanks mainly to a 3km incline near the start. I began to ponder the use of the word "race" and thought perhaps 10K run might be more appropriate. A second look at the hill made me reconsider the word run. Perhaps walk might be more appropriate.

The weather forecast for Sunday did not sound too promising -- cold with a chance of snow. It just kept getting better.

On race day, we awoke to a cloudy sky and a brief snow flurry but as the morning wore on, the snow started to melt. My husband enthusiastically indulged in his usual hearty breakfast of sausages, eggs and bacon while I 'enjoyed' a bowl of traditional plain oatmeal. A young couple sitting next to us had picked the same meals, leading me to conclude that the wife was also planning to race while her husband would be spectating.

In the large hall at packet pick-up, I was interested to see various women selling home baking, apparently as pre-race fuel. Sticky flapjacks, rice crispy squares and shortbread were selling like hot cakes and there wasn't an energy bar in sight!

Lining up at the starting line I spotted the young couple who had eaten breakfast beside us. To my surprise, they were both running. The idea of running hills on a stomach full of bacon,

sausage and eggs left me with a sense of disbelief and a certain degree of nausea.

The first kilometer was downhill, lulling runners into a relatively fast pace. That abruptly changed with the hill. It started off gradually. It wasn't too steep and offered the brief illusion of a reachable summit. However, the reachable summit proved to be a mirage, a teaser, a starting point for the next incline. As I gathered all my strength to power up the hill, I was aware that I was breathing harder than usual and making more noise than any of the runners around me. I was tempted to stop and catch my breath, but realized if I did I might not be able to start running again so I concentrated on simply placing one foot in front of the other, telling myself that within a few minutes it would all be over and my breathing would return to normal. As I huffed and puffed along, it occurred to me that despite the fact that I live at the top of a hill, I rarely run hills in training and this one just kept on going and going. After what felt like an eternity, I reached what appeared to be the top. Sadly, this proved to be another mirage and there was one final incline before the course evened out. I had never felt so relieved. The remainder of the course was picture perfect as we ran by beautiful valleys, quaint cottages and ancient castles. At one point, we even passed some horses who galloped along in the field beside us. The final stretch was a downhill portion, which allowed for



a final push to impress the gathered supporters. Awards were given to the top male and female runner in five categories -- overall, veteran, super veteran, vintage and local. I finished second in the super veteran category with a time of 49 minutes -- close but no cigar -- or whisky (I am assuming the prize was whisky!). My time was far from a PR, but considering the route and my aversion to hills, I was satisfied.

Prior to my race in Scotland I had been going through a slump, in part due to weight gain and slower race times and in part because I was quite simply in a rut. That 3km hill taught me a lot about myself. I realized I was tougher than I thought, but also that I was somewhat lazy and haphazard when it came to training. Many times I was simply going through the motions, but my heart just wasn't in it. Since my Scottish experience, I have made a few changes to my training and in the process I have rediscovered my passion for the sport. All it took was a hill.