

Don't Fear Success

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The road to success is so often paved with stones of failure and disappointment that sometimes a really great race can just sneak up on you. I recently had the pleasure of experiencing one of these “stealth” PR’s at The Wall 30K on January 20th in New Orleans.

I’d been very happy with the way my 50K training has been going since October’s Pan Am Cup in Ecuador. The feeling you get when training is going almost too well is hard to describe. Certainly there are hints that things are coming together, but there’s always that nagging underlying fear that the other shoe is about to drop; that any day you’ll wind up sick, injured or overtrained. But sometimes the train keeps a rolling and you find yourself in the best shape of your life.

You’d have to go back to when you were six years old to recall a similar feeling. Back to the year that you hoped and prayed and wrote to Santa for a shiny new bicycle. That string of great workouts is like that big, strangely shaped package under the Christmas tree: Of course you hope there’s a bike under all that brightly colored wrapping paper. You even dare to think it’s a bike. But you just can’t be sure until the paper comes off.

On that levee in New Orleans I got a hint that maybe, just maybe, everything is going to come together and Santa’s going to leave me a shiny new bike at the National 50K in San Diego on February 17th. For a number of reasons, I went into The Wall race convinced it was going to be a less-than-stellar day. The 8:00am race was preceded by a Saturday Night Mardi Gras party—a New Orleans Mardi Gras party, mind you; zero hours of sleep; and the minor burden of having completed three marathons the preceding three weekends, including a 3:50 at the Mississippi Marathon a week before.

I felt pretty ragged during my warm-up, but for some reason I felt smooth and in control once the race started. Hitting the first mile in 7:50, I thought I should back off a bit. I eased off to miles of 8:01 then 8:10, but that felt way too slow, so I went back to hitting steady 8:00s. After about 10K I started to feel like I was going faster and faster as I began passing runners who went out too fast and were losing steam, but I was still clicking off steady 8:00s.

30K (18.6 miles) is a fairly long way to go, but it’s still a heck of a lot shorter than a marathon. So after holding back the previous three weekends I was eager to spread my wings a bit. But when you go fast in a long race there’s always the chance that somewhere long before the finish the wheels are going to come off. And that day in particular I fully expected it. But I was enjoying the feeling of going fast way too much to slow down.

After the 15K turn-around each mile—7:58, 7:52, 7:50, 7:49—was like the next card in a dream poker hand: Ten of hearts. Jack of hearts. Queen of hearts. You know it’s not going to happen. That next card has to be a six, an eight, anything but a King. But there he is! Another step closer to a near-impossible Royal Flush. 7:50, 7:49, 7:49. Another and another and another. You don’t know when, but you know Lady Luck is going to drop the hammer on you. The last card falls. Two? Five? Ace of hearts!

Miles seventeen, eighteen, and that cruel “point six” were all aces. Each one just as easy as miles one and two.

It’s been years since I’ve experience a similar feeling of flying during a race; reveling in the speed, but all the while waiting, like Icarus, for my wings to melt. The last time was in Becescaba, Hungary in 1996. In a race a month earlier I was on pace for a 1:25:00 20K, which would have been a big personal record. Through 5K,

10K, 15K, I knocked off steady 4:15 kilometers (6:50 miles). Then it all came crashing to a halt at 17K. I fell completely apart and limped home in 1:26:28.

On an even faster pace in Hungary, I was fully expecting things to come apart, but for some reason, on that day they did not. The last two kilometers were the fastest of the race and I wound up finishing in 1:24:29—another PR and the 3rd fastest 20K time in U.S. history.

Bad days do happen. But so do good days. Sometimes there's a little bit of that magic in the air and everything falls into place for you. If you're lucky it will be on a day that matters—like at the ATR. So don't be afraid to take chances. If you find yourself going way to fast on Dauphin Street, but you're feeling good anyway, go with it; see how long you can make the magic last!

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