

# The Arduous Joy of Racing

## A valediction for "Running Times," which so richly served performance-seeking runners of all levels and ages.

By [Roger Robinson](#) Thursday, December 24, 2015, 10:06 am

Roger Robinson (right) finds fun in serious training, competition, and friendly rivalry at age 76. He is a reflection of the Running Times audience, he writes. Photograph by K.V. Switzer

It's magic—that moment in a race when suddenly, unexpectedly, you think you might beat the rival who has broken away from you. It was almost two miles into the 8K race when Rob caught an unexpected glimpse of Joel's red shirt, bobbing among the crowd of runners ahead.

*There he is! It's him! Is he coming back? Am I closing? Maybe, maybe! Yes! There he is again!*

Rob was suddenly refocused. From the gun, Joel had powered confidently away, soon out of sight in the surging river of runners. Rob, his pace stretched close to the edge, had given away hope of the age-group win. That was as expected. Joel was a minute faster on recent times.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, the race was on again. Rob checked the gap.

*He's closer! About 18 seconds. Must have gone out too fast, and he's paying for it. There's a chance. Don't blow it. Catch him slowly. Slowly! Yes, good, down to 15 seconds. Get it right. Twelve seconds. Now he's within range. Get with him and wait.*

Between two and three miles Rob angled across through the moving crowd to take up position a step behind Joel. The pace seemed a shade slower. Following is always easier.

*Wait! Wait! This is good! Get it right! Wait till he's at his lowest! Between three and four is the place to break him.*

When you wait like that, there's a build-up of potential energy. You're near full stretch but the battery is recharging. At every stride the mind is assessing how you feel and how he looks. At three miles Rob began to sense the moment. He moved alongside. Later Joel said, "You looked so smooth, and I was leaking oil." It wasn't quite time to attack, but to share, to test, to put just a little pressure on—getting ready.

Rob wanted a good break by four miles. The course's last half-mile is downhill, so with his restricted downhill speed he needed a gap before that point. After three minutes side by side, with the four-mile marker due soon, it was time. Rob surged—not too hard, not tilting over into oxygen debt, but enough to change the rhythm. He got the break, worked hard after four to keep it, and held it down the hill to the river.

The finish-line felt like a triumph.

Rob is me. Joel is Joe Philpott, top senior age-group runner in Virginia. The race was the HCA Virginia 8K, part of the excellent Richmond Marathon festival on November 14, 2015. Joe and I are aged 72 and 76. For the race narrative above, I changed our names and concealed our ages, otherwise no reader under 50 would have got past the first sentence, or believed that such doddering old antiques could possibly have a race worth taking seriously.

But it is so. Believe me. It's been more than 25 years since I experienced a race as totally absorbing and ultimately successful as that one. That race demanded the same hard and carefully structured hours of training, the same intense commitment—mental as well as physical—and the same sequence of precise tactical decisions, as when I was racing 29 minutes for 10K, 50 years ago.

In age group terms Joe and I ran well, national class: 36:01 for me, 36:28 for Joe. But this, my last “Roger on Running” column for *Running Times*, is not about age. It is dedicated to the thing that has distinguished *Running Times*, and made it so true to running as it evolved from 1977 to 2015—the recognition that competition, runner-to-runner contest, aspiration, totally committed personal effort, are still of the essence, even in the ascendance of the “complete, not compete” mass fun-run culture.

“Why don't you just have fun?” friends sometimes ask me. But I do have fun, I say, nothing is more fun for me than the drama and challenge of a hard tactical race. I love it, win or lose. It's like a great novel or play, but you're one of the characters, you're in the midst of the action, and you don't know how it's going to end. Are you the hero or a minor face in the crowd? Only the race will tell. Nothing is more fun than that, or the months of hard structured training with a friend or teammates, all focused on improvement.

Thirty years ago, in *Heroes and Sparrows*, my first running book, I described my famously rigorous interval training as “purposeful fun.” That was the truth. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. Young, rambunctious, and intently focused, we jested and mocked our way through miles of unremitting effort. I'm uncomfortable with the insistence that unpurposeful “fun” is the be-all and end-all of human choice about how to use our disposable time. I enjoy my cakes and ale as much as anyone, but I grew up in the aftermath of a devastating war, on a literature that values the deep rewards of duty, moral honesty, and strenuous personal effort to make the most of your talents.

For the ancient Greeks—not a bad cultural role model—it was through competition that humanity could best fulfill our potential and approach nearest to the gods. Racing to your best was a religious commitment. Their word for competition was “agon,” from which we take “agony,” our word for extreme pain, and also our word for active participation, as “protagonists.” Not just being there, but contesting, striving to achieve your best possible.

The athletes lived and trained before the Games in sacred sanctuaries.

“The sanctuaries' spiritual task was to teach that it was only through the contest, the sporting competition, that humanity could succeed in becoming free from the 'bestial life,' in awakening and developing the inexhaustible mental and physical powers with which nature has endowed us...The Games laid the foundation for the ideal of noble rivalry.” (Nicolaos Yalouris, *The Eternal Olympics*, 1976)

“Noble rivalry” gets it well. Nothing forges a friendship better than a hard race, or a hard training session, because you feel such total respect for someone who has pushed to her or his limits and made you push to yours. I'd never met Joe Philpott before, but quickly found he is a substantial, engaging, and literate man. And a terrific runner and competitor. He reports that he went right back to the drawing board, revised the intervals component in his training, analyzed his over-ambitious first mile, and he will no doubt be after my guts next time we met.

He's not the only one. Harry Carter, 79, whom I beat in Boston in June, told me later through Facebook, “I'm working on recovering my marathon qualifying time and so far am staying healthy.” Then there's Bill Mayle, Ron Maston, Roland Comrie, and others. This year was my best racing year for three decades. But next year, for me, begins to look like the Gunfight at OK Corral. We love it, creaky old pensioners though we are. The harder, the better. Don't tell us we're not having fun.

There's nothing elitist or exclusive about this. It's true in every age group. We don't interfere with all the non-competitive runners who are there for their own kind of fun. Our sport is huge, and generously inclusive. I do smile, however, at all those—pretty much every runner on the planet—who claim to be running “only to finish,” yet go into ecstasies when they hear they got a personal record. No one is immune to the pleasure of improvement (“developing their mental and physical powers,” as the Greeks put it). The heroes and the sparrows, I wrote 30 years ago, truly are equal.

But at this sad moment in running's history, with the demise of the magazine that so richly served racing runners of all levels and ages, it's appropriate to take a last opportunity to celebrate pure racing—and its “arduous joy.”

It's admirable, and of great benefit to society, that so many runners join our sport because they want to take charge of their health, lose weight, eat well, claim private time, transform their lives, raise money for a good cause, be part of a community, and many other excellent reasons. I am putting a word in here for another group, those of us who may share those motives, but more than anything simply love to race. We love the process, the way of the competitive runner's life, the sharpness of mind and emotional joy it gives us, and the welcoming community of fellow racing runners it admits us to.

“Life has no happiness as pure, or as fully deserved, as winning the race by your own speed and strength, achieving it through determined preparation and focused courage on the day.” That's the Greek poet Pindar, about 2,490 years ago. We may lose our magazine but we won't lose the happiness of competition.