



Running by Feel: No Watches, No Monitors and No Distractions

The training for a runner can become one constant assessment. “How heavy are my legs up this hill?”, “Did I drink enough water today?”, “How fast am I going?”. Monitoring the body and knowing where it’s limits lie is the talent a seasoned racer cultivates. This quality can balance the intensities of training and the stresses of life to allow ones potential to unfold. But the flip side of this, when the focus of the assessment becomes an obsession with pace or heart rate, can become a detriment to progress.

The concept of perceived excursion has been formalized for most of us in what is known as the Borg scale. The 15 or 10 point scales act as a thermometer for intensity and ties a point value to it. But long before someone pointed to a tower of numbers to ask us to quantify what running at top aerobic speed felt like, we observed and noted how long and how hard we could go. For most of us this was part of our discovery of running.

Running ‘hard’ is relatively easy assuming a willing participant. But like most things in life simply banging away at it gives you little more than you put into it. With running simply ‘hitting the splits’ and ‘logging the miles’ has its place, but there needs to be an accompaniment of awareness to the attitude, form, and effort that goes into this work to make it sustainable. Running by perceived effort can allow a runner to break apart the race she is training for in an interval session, rejuvenate a weary body in a recovery run and stoke the passion of the sport on long hard runs.

To create a language of perceived effort beyond numbers we can center effort around the concept of the ‘steady state’. Steady state effort is one that is near the top speed where energy can be largely obtained from aerobic metabolism. Specifically this is where one begins utilizing the substrate from carbohydrates for fuel in as great a quantity as fat. But that doesn’t tell us what it feels like. Comfortably hard, steady and rhythmic, up tempo are all terms used to describe this pace. As a coach I like to describe it as an ‘even in and even out’ in your breathing. That if you are focused on how your breath changes you will find that the volume on inhalation feels very similar to the volume on exhalation at the steady state effort. This is caused by the increased use of oxygen and therefore the larger amount of carbon dioxide that is leaving the body an each expelled breath.

Play with the concept of running by effort or ‘feel’ in your running. See if you can find that feel of steady state. Don’t over do it. Don’t run all your runs at this effort, but find it and know it. It’s a technique that will serve you well.

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