

Running Dues

PAID IN FULL

Ray Wyvill

I have a screen saver on my computer at work. Many people stop to look at what appears to just be a large group of runners. When they look closer, they see it's really a picture of the start of last year's Annapolis Ten Miler. People usually stare at it awhile and ask the same question, "Where are you?" The answer comes quickly, "In there somewhere." Some will ask, "Well, how was it?" That answer also comes quickly, "Awful".

I tell them that A10 is the hottest, most miserable, and vicious road race I ever ran. It's held every year on the last Sunday in August before Labor Day. Every year I swear to God and all things Holy, that I won't ever do it again. Yet, somehow, I always seem to find myself in a full sweat, wanting for the starting gun. "What the heck have I gone and done this time?" There's a quote, that history teachers tend to use, about those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I tend to remember that quote somewhere around, ho, mile three, or thereabouts. But the truth of the matter is, I know why I'm there.

A10 is a great race, on great roads, through lovely scenery, meticulously organized, impeccably run but incredibly hot. It is the last real race of summer. The next day, school starts. Another summer gone away. Fall is coming quick. The A10 sort of a balloon payment for summer. All the heat, all the humidity, and all the sweat coming together for 75 miserable minutes. You go out there and pay the debt for all the beer; all the air conditioning; and the days you didn't run because it was too hot. All the guilt get wiped out in one fell swoop. When it's over, you get to stand around and drink beer and tell each other how hot it REALLY was. "I'm tell-

ing you, Bobby, it was hotter'n Satan's Forge. Did you see that sprinkler at mile 7? It was so darn hot the water was flashin' to steam." It is the ritual that buries summer.

You understand that you were called to this thing. It started when you made the decision to take up this sport. When you decided that breaking into a full sweat on a daily and voluntary basis was something you really wanted to do. It continued when whatever modest goal first set was met, then exceeded. And, as with any venture, you looked around the horizon to find a new goal. Because eventually, you find yourself at the A10 starting line. It's big. It's local. It's advertised. It goes on the list and suddenly "You are in." So off you go

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with all your little 5K's and 5 milers in your pocket that got you "ready" for this thing. Then you hit mile 6. At that point, a thought similar to "You know this is really rude!" flies through your brain. Followed a mile or two later by, "I ain't never doing this again." But you're lying and you know it. Because it kicked you. And you can't let it just kick you like that and get away with it. No sir, can't have that. Publicly, you're swearing off the thing, inside you're making all kinds of vows. "Yessir, gonna drop a couple pounds and get harder than a piece of armor plate. Gonna do more speed

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Plan A goes along fine until July of the following year, when it's so hot you can't spell interval. You started sweating in June and you haven't stopped yet. And armor plate isn't all it's cracked up to be. And thank God it was only a couple of pounds. Next thing you know, you're on the start line, in a full sweat, wondering, "What the heck have I gone and done this time?" You run this thing, having the exact same Divine Revelation of the year before (only this time they come at earlier mile markers). And you fund yourself with buds over Buds, telling even more outrageous lies than the year before., "I don't care if 'Shining Path' terrorists hold me at gun point and threaten to remove all my skin with 80 grit sandpaper, I won't run it. I'll take my chances with the sandpaper." But you know, you'll be back. Because you are called there, by whatever internal voice that got you there the first time. And you must attend.

Fall means grand and glorious races in cool air amid colorful leaves. Army 10 is the world's largest, complete with band, cannons to start the race, and an old Southern chaplain. He always uses the same prayer, "Heavenly Father we thank you for healthy bodies that love to run..." Over bridges ...past historic monuments ...finishing at the Pentagon. It's a gorgeous course and a great race in every sense of the word. There's Seaside, run through the deserted streets and boardwalk of Ocean City in late October. The ocean and beach are clean and empty. Summer's haunts revisited on the verge of winter. There are marathons just about anywhere: Washington, New York, Memphis, North Central Trail and on and on. A super five miler through lovely, autumn woods beside the Bay. The Hog Neck is usually the first race where you need a long-sleeved shirt. Winter follows with races run less for competition than for an excuse to get outside and see old friends. The post-race rituals are different, too. Conversations over hot cider center on the "Sore Muscle of the Month" and upcoming ski trips. Those encounters always trigger racing memories, however. For some reason, with frost on the ground and trees stripped bare by cold, I remember A10. it was dues paid in full. And it wasn't long ago or far away.