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Short Story: Snow Strategy

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Snow Strategy

by James Brennan



Jessica Lee

1

Kevin Kelly stood in the third or fourth row of runners at the starting line. Even though the temperature was in the middle twenties, some runners wore shorts. Others had wool caps pulled over their ears and wore long thermal underwear with tee shirts and shorts on the outside. Kevin was hatless with a maroon and grey nylon running suit over his shorts and singlet. The large flakes of wet snow were swirling in and around the runners as they milled about, restlessly shifting from foot to foot.

The snow flakes melted on Kevin's face and hands, but he could see the white layers already building up in the hair and eyebrows of the other runners. Two inches of wet slush had now accumulated on the road surface and there would be more before they finished. He tried to forget that he still had to drive thirty miles home after the race and he had not yet put snow tires on his car. He had run races in the snow before in December and January — but November? He hadn't even thought of snow when he mailed his registration in October. The TV weather forecasters last night had all announced only a twenty percent chance of drizzle for today. Another one of those storms that was supposed to go out to sea.

"Damn weathermen!" he muttered to himself.

"Huh?" A runner wearing number 302 spoke to him as he hunched down behind another body.

"Nothing," Kevin replied absently, not really wanting to talk. He needed to think about his strategy for this five-mile race and he didn't feel like talking about the weather. It was only three or four minutes until starting time now. Usually he planned his run as he drove to the race, but today he had other things on his mind. Now he knew that without some sort of plan he would just fall into a hypnotic trance, without other runners pounding along beside him. Maybe he'd shoot for a six and one-half minute first mile and then try to pick up the pace at mile one for a couple of two-minute drills. Then he could back off at mile two again to a six-thirty pace, then...

"What pace you gonna go at today?"

The same guy was talking to him again. Why the heck did somebody always ask that question at the starting line? Was the other runner sizing him up as a pacer? Did he figure on him as his competition and plan to beat him? Maybe he knows me from another race, thought Kevin.

"Oh, I don't know. Footing's pretty bad, so I put on these old heavy shoes for better traction. Hell, they're already wet. I'll be happy with seven-minute miles. I'd like to do a 33-minute-plus race, but 34 minutes is OK with me today."

"Yea, that would be good."

"What are you planning to do?" Kevin asked politely.

"I don't know. I haven't run many races. I usually run about eight-minute miles, I think."

"Oh, great," Kevin thought silently. "There's one I'll have to pass or fall over right at the start." He felt like asking him to get behind him.

"I guess you're a runner and I'm just a jogger," said number 302.

"Just two different ways to spell the same word." Kevin replied. He checked the pins on his number — 714.

He had always admired the kind of feelings runners had for each other's abilities — or failings. In some cases, he thought it was simply because the slow beginning runner was only months away from blowing the fast runners off the road. You never knew when that transition from novice to pro took place.

"I guess I'm not in your class anyway."

As Kevin brushed the snow from his greying hair he thought that it must have been pretty obvious, since number 302 appeared to be about 25 years old and he had turned 53 just last week. He was sure he looked every day of it to a young person like this.

"Right. Fortunately, this race has a senior division and I don't have to run against those quick 40-year-old masters today."

"Yes. That's why I'm in this race," another voice said behind him.

He turned and saw Chuck Bradshaw. "Hi. It's good to see you again Chuck."

"How have you been Kevin?"

"Great. A lot of good races this year. I did a 3:30 in Newport. Maybe next year I'll get the 3:20."

Chuck was an old nemesis. Kevin had beaten him by less than a minute in the Quincy half-marathon in September, after an embarrassing five-minute loss to him in the John Kelley twelve-miler at New London in ninety-degree heat last summer.

Had it all come down to this in his extended middle age? Competition, times, strategy, pace — trying to win? Sizing up the opponents? When he had started jogging only three and a half years ago to lose weight, he never anticipated that this world even existed — never mind that he could be part of it. He had started out at 49 years of age as an overweight 160 pounder and now he was a lean 127 with a resting pulse that he often counted at 44 in the evening.

Whups, the president of the South Shore Roadrunners was announcing something and an official was pointing a starter's pistol at the clouds. He never heard these last minute instructions anyway. He doubted that anyone did. He wondered if his icy finger would be able to push the button on his watch.

What the heck would he do now? He never went into a race without some sort of strategy. Hell — he was an improviser. As a teacher of college math with 24 years of experience, he knew the feeling of being unprepared. He'd walked into the classroom with a piece of chalk and no plans plenty of times. Chuck could provide the strategy. He'd watch Chuck — let him set the pace, hang with him till the four mile mark, then kick the "Beardsley Mile" and take him. That's what Beardsley needed against Salazar in Boston last April — a steady, pounding, straining run — get in front and move like a machine. When the other guy moves up a bit respond like a machine.

Bang!

He hit the watch button and began to move. Number 302 was almost walking with a woman running slowly alongside him. He couldn't get between them, so he jogged along waiting for a gap to open. The runner next to him slipped and bumped him heavily as he cursed at the weather. Now the two in front of him moved apart and he

slipped between them. He surveyed the twenty or thirty runners ahead of him. Where was Chuck's dark blue running suit? He must still be behind him. He heard footsteps — could Chuck be right behind him, the way they started? He was afraid to look back. Silly. He could hear footsteps all around him. He picked up the pace. Now the slower runners were behind him and the leaders were opening up the distance from those following. Faster runners who had broken out of the pack behind him were now beginning to pass. He was surprised. The footing wasn't too bad, but the snow was piling up in his eyes now and brushing it away didn't help much.

The timer for the first mile was just ahead and he could hear him shouting out the splits — they were still unintelligible and he couldn't see his watch through the snow in his eyes. He was almost at the mile mark as he heard the split: "Six-twenty-four!" Wow — the best first mile he'd ever run — now what? Go for the double two minute pick-ups? He was sure he heard those same footsteps behind him now. No doubt about it, Chuck was going to dog him. How long would he hang on his back? Never mind — trying to pull away now made no sense. Hold on steadily until he tries to move. Wow, could Chuck be thinking about a "Beardsley Mile" at mile four? Maybe Kevin didn't have a patent on the strategy. Hell, maybe that wasn't even Chuck back there!

He ran through mile two with a 13:10 split. Slowing down to a more sensible pace now, Kevin figured he'd go for a seven minute pace between two and four miles. Just then he saw a boy throw a snowball into the line of runners. As the missile sailed just below his chin, he heard the runner behind him yell, "You little jerk, you better be gone when I get back here!"

Yep, that was Chuck's voice. He was dogging Kevin. Kevin muttered, "I won't be intimidated. You're not fooling with an amateur now, Chuck."

There was no time to wonder about how he had become addicted to running and competition anymore. No time to be amazed at the fact that his fifty miles per week on the road were



more than he drove his car locally. There was only one thing on his mind now as he began to pass one faltering runner after another. Maintain a steady pace, run like a machine, keep something in reserve for the inevitable move that Chuck was planning.

At four miles, the timer called out, "27:14 and one to go!" He'd lost a bit, but he felt that he was ready now for Chuck's move. Now they started up their first hill — a gradual, steady rise that would have been an annoyance at this point on a good day. Right now it looked like a mountain and Kevin was beginning to hurt all over.

He saw the runners ahead turning a sharp corner to the right. Their feet were slipping off to the left and he figured it would be smart to swing wide and avoid falling down. As Kevin moved off to the left, Chuck ran splashing by on his right, slipping and recovering as he pounded ahead, the steam from his puffing breath hiding the grim look on his face.

Kevin looked ahead — another hill and this was a steep one. That corner would be Chuck's downfall! This must be his first time on the course too. Any other day and they both would have driven through the course first and known about the trick waiting for them around that corner. As Chuck crossed the crest of the hill, Kevin moved alongside him and ran with him as they started down the hill.

"Come on Chuck, kick it to the finish!"

Now Kevin moved steadily away from Chuck, his arms held out like wings on the downhill stretch to keep his balance. He could see the finish and

hear the cheers of the runners' friends who had braved the weather to urge their heroes to the end. He was sure he had it now and he couldn't hear Chuck's splashing footsteps anymore.

The runner ahead slipped on his belly into the chute. Kevin was so intent as he crossed the slippery finish line that he forgot to hit the stop button on his watch. He looked up at the big digital clock. He saw 34:01, 34:02, 34:03... Great! He felt great! The exhilaration of a fast finish made him jump up and wave his arms, in spite of his breathless condition. He turned in the chute as Chuck ran up behind him and he grabbed Chuck's hand.

"Good race baby! How to go! Great day wasn't it?"

"Yeh, just super Kevin. Good race. You've got one helluva kick in the last mile. That's all Beardsley needs..."

Kevin turned away smiling as the woman at the end of the chute wrote 714 on her wet paper and said, "First Senior."

2

Kevin glanced at the thermometer by the back door as he ran from his car and hurried into the kitchen. The temperature was twenty-eight degrees and he knew from the gray sky overhead that there was a very real possibility of snow. New England weather could be unreal in February, but he felt that familiar urgency about getting into his running clothes and getting out on the road. It was already Wednesday and he had not run since Sunday.

He had qualified for Boston in Newport, and now Boston was only seven weeks away. He had run thirty-mile weeks just to maintain his conditioning in the dreary cold and dark months of December and January, but now he was in an eight-week training period for the big marathon. He wanted to go through two weeks of fifty miles, two of seventy, two of eighty, one of one-hundred and then lay back for a restful thirty-mile week before the race. For four years of injuries and frustration he had been trying to qualify for Boston and now that he had finally done it, he wanted to arrive in top shape and make a good showing.

The real motivation for his intensity has begun with his first-place performance in the November snow. It was his first win and now he was encouraged to excel at long distances. In spite of his excitement, he had wrapped the trophy for that victory in his running clothes and smuggled it into the house. He was slightly embarrassed and feared the strange glances that might come from his family if he displayed the cheap metal-and-wood trophy. It was now well-hidden under some old paint brushes in the garage.

"Hi, Mary Lou! Gotta get going. It will be dark in an hour and I'd really like to get ten miles in today."

"Oh Kevin, you're crazy. The radio says it's already snowing in Boston. It will be pitch black before you get back. Can't you go out in the morning? You just did twenty miles on Sunday."

"No — can't get behind on my schedule. I'm already nervous about laying off for two days. If the weather's OK tomorrow, I may start doing a short run in the mornings. I'm going to have to start doubling up soon."

"Oh, Kevin..."

He loved Mary Lou very much, but why did she always put that "Oh" in front of his name?

By now Kevin's shoes were tossed into one corner of the kitchen. His socks were lying by the open closet door in the dining room where he was rummaging through a pile of running shoes to find a matched pair. He had already pulled a blue nylon running suit from a hook on the back of the door. Kevin had hurriedly stepped out of his street clothes and pulled the running suit on over his undershorts and tee shirt. Now he was sitting on the floor absentmindedly pulling on the same damp brown socks that he had just taken off. He laced up his tattered and soiled shoes and stretched his leg muscles by pushing against the door frame that led into the family TV room.

"Hi, Dad. What's happening?" The voice from the next room belonged to his daughter, a college senior who was avoiding homework and kitchen chores by burying herself in a television soap.

"Hi, Milly. I'm getting dressed to go running. Any good classes today?"

"All pretty sleep provoking. General Hospital is better. Are you running again? Right now? This Late?"

"Yes. Have to dear. I've gained eight pounds since November. See ya."

"See you in a while, Mary Lou."

"Oh Kevin, can't you relax?"

As he fell quickly into a steady seven-minute-per-mile pace, the first hard pellets of snow began to sting his face. Kevin knew exactly where he was going and he knew that he would stick to the planned route. He had learned long ago not to trust his own judgment about routes or distances after he had run for several miles. As he turned the corner onto Broad Street, he heard footsteps behind him and he saw another runner approaching over his shoulder.

"Hello, Kevin, How far you going?"

"Hi Brad. Ten — I hope. You just starting?"

"Yes. I'll go five with you — how fast?"

"Sevens — I think. That OK?"

"Great. Maybe I can do ten. It's gonna snow."

"Nah. Just a little flurry."

Talk between the runners was in short, clipped sentences. They seemed to be trying to cram the words in between breaths. As they pounded along in stride, lights began to come on in windows of houses and the automatic streetlights high up on poles began to flicker on. Now and then a car came along and the two slipped into single file along the left side of the road. An hour went by quickly, but the accumulation of white snow pellets in both runners' hair showed they had been out for a while. As they turned back onto Broad Street about a mile from Kevin's house, Brad said:

"I'll turn off here and head home. See you later, Kevin."

"Right. Thanks for a good run Brad."

Kevin picked up the pace in the dark for a hard final mile. He was on the right side of the road now, running on the wide, paved shoulder. He knew this stretch well, but the headlights of the cars heading south momentarily blinded him as they went by. The reflective strips Mary Lou had sewn on his running suit made an eerie glow in the snow-filled air. Abruptly he stumbled as he stepped into a pothole.

"Geez... !" He called out to nobody in particular. "What the heck. I can run through this little ankle twist before I get home." The cold weather and his own natural pain killers effectively dulled what had been a sharp pain at first, but he knew he was limping as he ran up his driveway. As he walked into the kitchen, the ankle twisted again and he caught himself on the corner of the kitchen table.

"Oh Kevin, are you hurt?"

"Maybe — would you put some ice-cubes in a plastic bag please?"

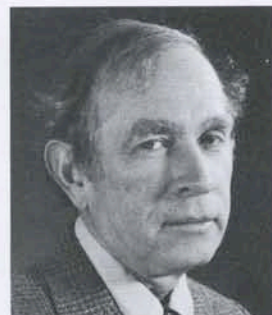
He sat in a dining room chair with his foot up on another chair as Mary Lou balanced the bag of ice cubes on his ankle.

"Oh Kevin, can it really be this important? Do you really enjoy this?"

"Damn it, Mary Lou, why must you always say 'Oh Kevin?'"

Mary Lou smiled as she wiped the melted snow from his forehead and kissed him gently over each eye.

"C'mon, Kevin, wash up, we've got spaghetti for supper." □



Robert Ward

James Brennan is chairman of Biological Sciences. He has a B.S. and an M.S. from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and a Ph.D from the University of Maryland. Since his arrival at Bridgewater in 1961, his primary teaching responsibilities have been in cytology, electron microscopy, genetics and human heredity. His research interests have centered around problems of cellular form and development in plant tissues. An avid runner, Professor Brennan has completed twelve marathons and continues to run regularly in Bridgewater.