

RUNNING UP THAT HILL

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I never had any desire to run with people before. Perhaps it was my solitary genes muffling the social cravings. Or perhaps it was just a lack of imagination. In any case, for almost ten years I had gone jogging on my own, only my walkman in tow, which later became my CD man and more recently my iPod. The only thing I agonised over was my selection of music. It needed a beat but couldn't be aerobics. It had to have melody but couldn't slacken the pace. A blend of Keane, Jeff Buckley and Abba would usually do the trick.



Then in August 2006, I arrived in Washington to work as a journalist. Knowing almost no one, I decided to take the advice of my dear cousin who recommended I join Front Runners. He himself was a regular at the London Front Runners where he met his boyfriend. When you suddenly change environment, it is easier to break out of your routine and try new things. So I penned that initial e-mail, which quickly elicited a friendly response from Warren, who was keen to practice his French on me, having heard of my previous seven year existence in Brussels. As if by magic, Warren instantly recognised me when I arrived at the Shevchenko monument (well I guess I do look a little Irish) and warmly welcomed me into the fold.

I consider myself something of a shy person. I can never go up to a stranger in a bar unless my tongue has been loosened by a drink or two...or five. But somehow I felt no inhibitions striking up conversations with people in Front Runners. I remember everyone being interested in what I was doing in DC, in my time in Brussels and of course my country of birth, Ireland. I was surprised when a certain Todd recognised the newspaper I write for, *Europolitics*, and proceeded to ask probing questions about the finer details of the EU's data protection directive. It was only later that I realised this town is awash with political and legal junkies, cases even worse than myself.

One of the more memorable sights that first Saturday morning was the tanned, toned glistening torso I later learned belonged to one Richard Isaacs. Soon after, Richard very kindly invited me to join himself, Dave, Seth and John Wineberg at King's Dominion amusement park. After the first rollercoaster ride, which basically involved a freefall high-speed plummet towards concrete pavement before a

last second swerve, I was a quivering wreck. But I somehow recovered and managed to enjoy my baptism with fire into American popular culture.

A similarly traumatic immersion came after a Saturday morning run when I had my first encounter with The Bagel Lady. Always prone to carefully weighing the pros and cons of every decision however trivial, I had not realised this trait would not endear me to The Bagel Lady. As she machine-gunned questions at me mercilessly, my mind became paralysed with fear until a sensitive Front Runner (was it John Bean?) calmed me down and explained the bagel-choosing process. Now I'm a dab hand at it and nearly as quick on the draw as the formidable Bagel Lady herself.

Raising my fitness level was not the primary reason I joined Front Runners. Yet it has turned out to be an unexpected and welcome bonus. When I ran the Jingle All the Way 10K in West Potomac Park in December, I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw the clock at the finishing line flash 39 minutes – smashing my previous record by over two minutes. Indeed I was in such a state of shock that I proceeded to throw up – a feat I managed to repeat five months later at precisely the same point for the Sallie Mae 10K. Meanwhile, in my less frenetic-paced runs with the Front Runners, I discovered that contrary to my preconceived notion that running with others would stress me out, it was in fact relaxing me.

Running up hills is not something most of us embrace with unadulterated enthusiasm and I was no exception. But then one wild and wintry Sunday while marauding through Rock Creek Park with a rump of hardcore Front Runners all that changed. In a seemingly throwaway remark, Allen Greenberg suggested we take the hill at Peirce Mill instead of the regular flat route. Lennie warned, pleaded with me: "don't do it Brian—it's an evil plot he's hatching." Alas I did not listen. One short hill became a long one became three long ones and before I knew it I was sliding down the slippery slope of hill addiction. The agony, the ecstasy, the timeless meandering...but apart from Allen's stories, the scenery was impressive too. Now I'm a confirmed hilloholic. I wake up at night in cold sweats, wracked with fear of being transported to a hill-less place like the Netherlands or Florida. It's an addiction I bask in. ▼