

The Heart of the Matter

You can spend great periods of time thinking about sport and in particular just what makes up an endurance athlete. It happens to me a lot.

The last time was in late December and the sun was low and cold and my thoughts were casting long shadows. It was my neighbor, Big Jim; he was the one who'd brought it on by challenging me to identify a single illuminating principle of endurance sports; one idea around which he could suspend his disbelief.

"C'mon, Tinley" he goaded, "I used to see you and your pals running in the rain and riding across eight zip codes while I pushed paper across my desk. Just give this sedentary soul one generalized concept of why you endurance freaks do what you do."

It was a valid if not heartfelt prompt and hard as tried I couldn't conjure a worthy reply nor offer something without skirting into some mediated phrase as "well, it depends."

One thing, one reason, one central idea...that's all Big Jim asked as I stood in the front yard and had no singular pathway to the heart of the matter. Stumped, scanning the shadows as they crept eastward, I wanted an easy out, a plea bargain based on something ethereal and flaky. It was getting cold and I wanted to go inside. But Big Jim had helped me fix my sprinklers that day and I shrugged and mumbled something weak and watery about us *just following our hearts* before turning toward the door. Jim tactfully parried with a quote from Lincoln: "He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help."

Big Jim's heart had my thirsty plants bowing in praise. We owed him something.

In recognition of the three hours his hands had dug in my yard, I faced him full up and said I was going to think on it. Then his sweetheart-of-a-wife walked by and pulled two Mexican beers out of a sack like a magician finds a coin beyond your ear. This is why people don't move, I thought. It has nothing to do with job changes or downsizing a house. You stay in the same neighborhood for 25 years for the magical Mexican beer trick.

"Now, Big Jim, it's like this"...and I started in with my feigned Intro to Physiology lesson about cardiac stroke volume and ATP production and oxygen uptake and catecholamine release, all of which caused him to do what any man does when he loses interest in a conversation—he peels the label off the beer bottle.

Right then Big Jim sat down on the curb, a sure sign that he wasn't happy with me trying to substitute mechanics for motive. "Look, hotshot" his right eye held my two while he studied the gold and brown label with the other. "What's the most flattering thing you can say about another athlete?"

"Ah, that's easy," I sipped from my Bohemia and took his toss. "Any athlete will say the same—*he's got heart*--that's the biggest compliment a peer can offer."

Big Jim stood, pulling up his sagging Wranglers and wiping his hands behind the knees. He said he was going home for supper and thanks for making it perfectly clear why people ran and swam and biked and skied across deserts for "reasons only reason understands."

And then he limped away, mumbling Homer Simpson-like, “hmmm, heart of the matter.”

He’d known all along, of course. It was a brilliant tactic from a man who has trouble walking to the end of the block. And he knew that I knew it but couldn’t quite remember it. Because when talking about anything from the moment of conception to the end of earthly life, the heart—from all points of science, study and approach to knowledge—is a central point of departure, regardless of which direction that you are headed. And no less can be said about its role in endurance sports.

If broken from a failed relationship, we can still run miles and miles in an effort to heal it. If soaring from some grand victory we can still feel it break when others who live inside our own cannot share that glee. If we wear it on our sleeve we must be ready to take that which others can sling at us. And if we keep it too closely guarded we rarely reach the peaks and valleys of human emotion.

The four chambers of the heart drive the fluid that delivers the goods to the muscles that make us go. Blood moves as a clock to the points of the bodily compass. Kids understand this. Adults suffer the consequences of forgetting it. The heart can gush with pleasure if all systems move in sync or stop us cold in our tracks if dammed by the particulars of age and treason of poor choice.

The heart can be observed, dissected, broken, repaired and replaced. We rely on it like a good neighbor, realizing that even if it’s always there doing what it’s supposed to, we still need to pay attention to it.

To succeed in endurance sport and in life all you need is a big heart that has nothing to do with size.

When I saw Big Jim in the morning, he was out front admiring our sprinkler repair.

“We might need to replace that valve up near the big tree before too long.”

I asked him if he wanted to walk to the end of the block.

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