

The Other Race Stories

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I am casually addicted to competitive races on Sunday morning. The local 5k, the 14-mile Trail Run, the Sprint Tri, I sign up for them all and I have a drawer full of obnoxious, “techno-wicking”, never-seem-to-fit T-shirts to prove it. One of the reasons I love racing on Sunday is all of the stories you hear while waiting in-line for your registration packet. The leader’s stories are interesting: how they trained, what shoes they wore, when they completed their last podium-inspired effort. I soak these stories up and try to improve. Lately; however, I take more inspiration from the other race stories: the mother of two fighting her way back into shape by squeezing a 5k into an unrelenting schedule, the suburban dad running a trail-run with his pre-teen, if only to watch him spend a blessed afternoon not locked in mortal combat with a keypad. Everyone, it seems, overcomes something along the way to that Sunday morning start-line. This is one of those other stories.

My brother Brian was a gifted athlete. Born with broad shoulders and a thin waist Brian had the quintessential swimmer’s body. He swam competitively in high-school and was All-State in a few relays. However, Brian’s natural athleticism was hampered by chronic Asthma and severe Epilepsy. Brian’s Epilepsy was controlled by medication, but those same medications brought debilitating side-effects and a life-long dependency on health-care coverage. One of the little-studied, and disastrously under-appreciated, aspects of anti-seizure medications are their effects on the patient’s mental health. As advertised, the drugs allow an epileptic to lead a normal life, but make it hard to hold a normal job.

Without a job, and consequently without the health-care needed to pay for the medication, an epileptic often feels powerless. Brian overcame a lot of this and managed to graduate college, but his life never seemed to click. He bounced in and out of jobs. He would start boldly on new projects, only to get derailed by an untimely seizure or a boss who just got fed up with his forgetfulness. Years like this wear a person down. In the fall of 2007, Brian was 30 and living with my parents. He'd lost his job, again, and was rapidly depleting my parent's retirement savings. He was 20-lbs over-weight and dangerously depressed.

In October 2007, five of my siblings and I had a discussion to address Brian's rapidly deteriorating condition. In that conference, it was decided that my wife and I would invite Brian into our home. That plan served the dual-purpose of easing my parent's financial burden and getting Brian closer to his network of siblings who were aware of his pain and wanted to help.

As the designated mentor, I had a great shortcoming; I lacked empathy for Brian. I thought of him as a project; a dead-beat living on my parent's couch who needed some tough-love. For my conditioning workouts on the cold New England streets that winter, I now had an unwilling, and hopelessly out-of-shape, training buddy. I tortured Brian that winter. Normally mildly committed to winter-training, I became neurotic, if only to make Brian that much more miserable. If there was a gym-mat or a pull-up bar within a 20 ft radius, Brian and I were on it. I woke him up early to run on rainy January mornings. I would wait until he settled comfortably onto the couch at 9 p.m. and then

throw the gym bags at him and announce a late night trip to Gold's Gym. I wish I could say I had some great plan to help Brian with his depression, but I did not. I love working-out so I made Brian come with me; that was the extent of my mentoring. To his credit, Brian slogged through the tread-mill miles, stabilized his core, and painfully rebuilt the shoulders he was known for. The funny thing with exercise is it works. The Mayo Clinic in its opening to Fitness for Everybody likens exercise to a free, limitless, drug that anyone can take in any dose and feel instantly better. Brian took the medicine and regained confidence by exploiting his natural athleticism; eventually, the confidence spilled into other areas of his life. He found and held a job he seemed to enjoy. His seizures were well-controlled so he reached out to the local Epilepsy Foundation and applied for an open counseling position. He even began to pay my parents back for all their support the prior year.



As the winter months waned, Brian felt good enough to join me on some T-shirt collecting expeditions. We started with the Max's O'Hartford Wee Mile. The Wee Mile is a race I run every year with my kids, Emma (6) and Gavin

(5). In 2008 Brian joined us to celebrate St. Paddy's day. The Brian and Emma team won that year (16:12) with Gavin and me not far behind (17:20). These are laughable

times, but we were proud of them. Brian got decked out in shamrock green, ran a mile around Bushnell Park, and smiled a big spring smile.

After the Wee-Mile, Brian needed a stretch goal. I wanted an early season race to test our winter conditioning so, without Brian's permission, I signed us both up for the Broad Street Run in Philadelphia. There is no better way to shake off the winter doldrums than to run like a maniac straight down Broad Street for ten miles. Too good-natured to say no, Brian came with me to Philadelphia. I knew ten miles was a long effort for Brian, probably 20-30% above what he was trained for. Regardless of my misgivings, we suckered my brother Mike into joining us. The peer pressure was intense enough to get all three of us to the start-line. We stood together that morning and blended Brian's story with the other 20,000 participants waiting for the starter's gun. An Epileptic had fought his way back from depression and was ready to run a 10-miler.

Brian ran brilliantly that day. I don't think he believed he could finish, but he kept picking them up and putting them down. The miles ticked off slowly through the campus of Temple University, then faster through downtown and the crowds. Brian completed Broad Street in 2:01:38. Endurance sports are replete with suffering, but there are also the victories: the little moments near the finish when you nod to the good friend you just leaned out at the tape, the fist pump to the crowd when you see your wife with the sign. Brian, Mike, and I had one of those moments near the pretzel stand after the Broad Street run. A brand new sun was out after threatening rain during the race and Brian was grinning as if he could have rolled up the length of Broad Street and carried it home on

his shoulder like some giant trophy-rug. We high-fived, downed pretzels and laughed until our sides hurt more than our legs and our cell-phone batteries were spent from all the congratulatory phone calls. Why not? Brian had just run 10 miles!

After Broad Street, Brian's dedication and athletic gifts quickly surpassed my own. Now it was him chasing me to the gym. He even hounded me and two of our sisters, Anne and Kathleen, into signing up for the Niantic Bay Triathlon. Niantic Bay is a wonderful sprint distance event in a sleepy beach-town at the end of summer; a perfect race to end a great season. Brian's commitment to the Niantic Bay Tri was part of his realization that life can be enjoyed in small victories as well as big. Brian's Epilepsy robbed him of some of life's larger victories: a career, a wife, financial independence. That summer, while training for Niantic, Brian stopped fixating on these arbitrary milestones and began savoring the more immediate victories: a hard workout capped with a nice sprint, a local 5k run with new friends, a few high-fives with your brothers in Philadelphia. Brian realized, much before I did, that victories, big and little, need to be shared with others. Brian didn't want to smoke the Niantic Bay Course record. He wanted to share his honest effort with others as a means of experiencing joy. Brian connected through these little race victories and the people he mercifully chose to share them with were his brothers and sisters; including, and gratefully, the one who had tortured him all winter.

As he trained for Niantic you had a sense that Brian was hitting his stride. He lost the extra twenty pounds and was developing a solid aerobic base. Always a gifted swimmer, Brian easily outclassed the typical triathlete field in the water. His large quads made him

a powerful biker; although, his meager budget would have kept him from challenging the carbon-fiber bike set. Overall, with even a mediocre run, Brian would have been a solid triathlete.

In the middle of his training for the Niantic Bay Triathlon, and without warning, Brian died. Sudden Unexplained Death from Epilepsy (SUDEP) is common enough to have an acronym but Neurologists or Epilepsy Counselor will not tell you about it. They do not share details because there is nothing to be done. If you are male, in your thirties, chronically Epileptic, and on high doses of anti-seizure meds you will likely die unexpectedly in your sleep. There is no established cause and no grant-money to study the condition in any more detail. You just don't wake up on June 8, 2008.

Brian could not add his story to the start-line in Niantic. After the services, and a few weeks walking in that horrible fog that loss brings, my sister's and I tried to run Niantic. I would like to tell a dramatic "One-for-the-Gipper" tale of how we scorched our age-group's in Brian's memory, but that is not how these things go. Fitness is one measure of an athlete's ability, but grief will degrade performance as surely as a low VO2 max. Anne was smarter than the rest; she bailed on the run and entered a relay-team with her son Mike instead. Kathleen had a strong run, but got mauled at the swim-start and never put her race together (1:36:47). I had a great swim, but then had a mechanical problem with my bike and threw-up during a horrific 5k (1:17:37). My parents were there to support us, but no one felt much like cheering that summer. I suppose my family added our stories to that race in 2008, but we left Niantic quiet in our separate cars.

Another winter conditioning season came and went after Niantic. I did that one without a training buddy. I thought a lot about Brian as I picked my feet up and down on the usual streets. Mostly I thought how endurance sports are lonely affairs, but they do not have to be. In the midsts of our neurotic pursuit of a PR, we can take the time to learn about the other stories in the race. I spent nine months training with Brian the year he passed away and got to know him better than in the previous 30 years. I will never regret that effort, and Brian's memory left me with a special gift. Now I know why I get up early to run in the freezing cold. I don't train to set records, lose weight, or grow meta-physically; I train to meet up with friends and family at a small beach in Niantic in late summer.

In 2009, my family had seven finishers in the field at Niantic. There were the two returning runners:

- Pat Keane (Brian's Brother) 1:14:25
- Anne Reynolds (Brian's Sister) 1:47:08

Two rookies:

- Mike Keane (Brian's Brother) 1:25:40
- Maureen McElwain (Brian's sister) 1:48:52

And a relay team (1:32:09):

- Kathleen Reynolds (Brian's Niece)
- Annie Reynolds (Brian's Niece)
- Rachael Walker (A Friend)



In addition to the above participant's, Bill Reynolds (Brian's brother-in-law) volunteered on the bike leg. We ate a big bowl of pasta the night before and got to know each other better while

swapping stories about our nagging injuries and our insecurities about the upcoming race.

We trained and ran together. We missed Brian and savored our small victory.