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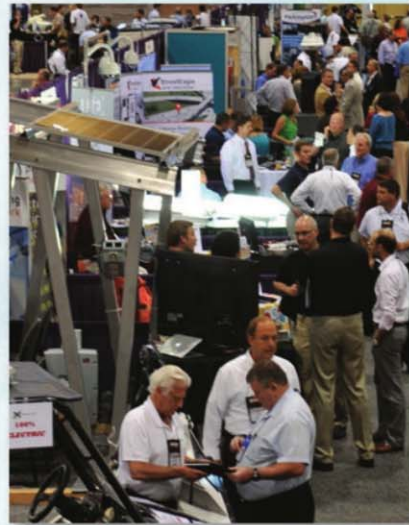
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Urban Hills – or Running the Ramp?

By Will Van Dyke

Living as I do in Evanston, IL, I am, first and foremost, a “flatlander.” Those of you who live in the Midwest, especially in the Chicago area, know what I mean. Oh, there is the occasional rise, but compared with New England or the Pacific Northwest, there aren’t many hills to challenge a runner. At least there aren’t many near our house.

In the early 1970s, my wife, Johna, and I lived in the Boston area, and I could find lots of hills on most of the running routes from our home in Somerville, MA. Often, on long

training runs with other members of the Cambridge Sports Union, we would run along the route of the Boston Marathon on the fabled stretch of the race known as “Heartbreak Hill.” In any case, running hills was a staple of our training,



“The garage I ran in is called a “double helix,” similar to the DNA double-helix molecule. The “up cycle” is a continuous clockwise spiral.”

and so when we ran a race, we were prepared for hilly courses.

As I have gotten older, however, I have found that running hills has become my nemesis. When I was younger, especially when we lived in New England, running hills didn’t bother me. I can distinctly remember long-distance races in that part of the country where the first two miles of the race were uphill, and it was not a problem for me. I even set a course record on such a 10-mile race in Littleton, NH.

But in recent years, I have noticed that I slow down dramatically in races, or even training runs, when I reach a hill or even a small rise in the terrain. In races, runners whom I pass along the way easily pass me by as I slog up any hill.

I ran a half-marathon last year, and at the end of the race one of the runners wondered

aloud what my running strategy was, as I easily passed him on the flat part of the course, but then he passed me easily on the hills. He couldn’t figure out how I could pass him and then he would pass me multiple times during the race.

It wasn’t a strategy though, it was pure survival mode on the hills, and then I got into my normal race pace.

Which brings me to the crux of this article. Last year, the U.S. Track and Field national cross-country championships were held in Forest Park in St. Louis, where my son and grandsons happen to live. I had wanted to run in the over-60 division, but a conflict in schedule prevented me from competing.

But my then-11-year-old grandson, Jack, ran in the open 2.4-kilometer race, finishing first in his small age group on a bitterly cold February morning. I vowed I would run the meet in 2013 in the Master’s Division 8-kilometer race. But I knew from my runs in St. Louis, and my knowledge of Forest Park, that there would be hills to cope with.

What to do, since there really aren’t any in Evanston, except for “Mount Trashmore,” which is a steep sled hill, built over a mound of garbage, hence the name. But it was too steep for the type of training I do; plus, in winter, it isn’t suitable for running.

But then a light bulb went off! Why not run up one of Evanston’s downtown parking garages? I am intimately familiar with parking garages from my career as a consultant, working on the planning and design of parking structures, or as they are called in some parts of the country, “parking ramps.”

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Will Van Dyke and a Double Helix.

Urban Hills – or Running the Ramp?

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Running up a parking garage ramp would be perfect. The slope is a consistent 5% to 6%; it's covered from the elements, so snow is no problem, and it would give me the hill workout I knew I would need. So that's what I decided to do.

One day a week near the end of a run of 6 to 7 miles, I ran up the ramps of a local parking garage, starting at the bottom and making my way up 12 stories to the top. The garage I ran in is called a "double helix," similar to the DNA double-helix molecule. The "up cycle" is a continuous clockwise spiral.

Once I got to the top, I made a loop to get to the "down cycle" of the ramp, running under the ramps I had just run up, but this time in a counterclockwise direction. The double-helix design bedevils most drivers (as you can see on the diagram on page 34), but it's a very efficient system for getting cars up and down quickly in a garage, especially one that is 12 stories tall.

The first week of my hill-training regimen, I ran to the top of the ramp once. But the second week, I did two complete cycles, and I could feel my legs getting stronger from the effort. I ran continuously without stopping until I reached the top.

I have continued to do this in the weeks preceding the race in St. Louis. Only time will tell if there will be a payoff in my racing time. My only hope is that I can run up the hills in Forest Park with a modicum of strength, and not embarrass myself.

Wish me luck.

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