

Myself and the Clock: Half Marathon at 80

Alice Lowe

Mile 1: The starting buzzer, at last. What a relief, after the alternating stress and tedium of waiting in the parking lot since before dawn, wandering around the start site to limber up and stay warm, wondering how I will fare in my first half marathon in over a year. My first since turning 80. Thirteen miles to go.

Mile 2: Unplugged. No music, no podcast, just the breeze off the bay, the traffic over the bridge, the quacks and squawks of ducks and gulls, my mind a clear channel for incoming signals. My eyes make short sweeps back and forth and ahead, always returning to a few yards in front of my feet, as I check for rocks, potholes, dogshit, anything that might throw me off balance, deter me from my goal.

Mile 3: I'm a power walker. I don't run, but I walk fast. Really fast. But it's more than that: power walking is empowering. It puts me in touch with every part of my body, brain, and breath; it invigorates and inspires me; it's my fountain of youth, my link to longevity. Runners, almost all younger, pass me in droves in the early miles, but like the tortoise racing the hare, I'll catch up with some of them later when they start to run out of gas.

Mile 4: This is my 18th half marathon. I did the first one at 70 as a personal challenge. I usually don't like crowd events, so I expected it to be a one-off, but the group energy was infectious. After a respectable finish, with friends cheering me from the patio of a downtown sports bar as I chugged the last quarter mile, I vowed I would do it again and continue to do them as long as I can, because I can.

Mile 5: My endorphins are soaring. The feel-good hormones that produce that coveted runner's high have kicked in. Now, this moment, I'm at my mental and physical peak. I'm not competing with the crowd, even the other old-timers (though I love beating them), not trying to set any records. It's just myself and the clock — not the race clock, but the one that ticks off the days and years of my life.

Mile 6: The half marathon (13.1 miles) world record for women is 1:04:02, set by Ruth Chepng'etich of Kenya in 2021. The average half marathon time across women of all ages is 2:00:12. My best half was 2:33:07 in 2018 when I was 75 and doing run/walk intervals, a pace of 11:42 that I'll never see again. But I'm still here.

Mile 7: Halfway there. My euphoria is heightened by the mid-point signpost and by the two women in front of the Hilton handing out red vines. I take two.

Mile 8: I brake for sea and shore birds. Well, no, not when the clock is running, but the joy of seeing them along the paths and at the water's edge is one of the year-round rewards of San Diego coastal routes: rails and sandpipers, curlews and whimbrels, coots and cormorants, Canada geese and assorted ducks, stately herons and egrets, prehistoric-looking pelicans and commonplace gulls.

Mile 9: Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. At periodic water stops, volunteers cheer us on and offer paper cups of H₂O and electrolyte-fueled sports drink. I have espresso gel and cherry-cola chews in my pockets. Salt, sugar, caffeine, and, always, water. But don't even think about stopping to pee.

Mile 10: The curlicued course weaves in, out, and around Mission Bay. We cross bridges and circle back. Detours added here and there to reach the regulation distance keep me on my toes. A few of the switchbacks and loops give me a chance to see that there are plenty of runners and walkers behind me. Someone has to be last, but it's not going to be me, not this time.

Mile 11: I never did a full marathon, and I regret not trying. Women were excluded from the Olympic marathon until 1984. Fifty women competed in that first event, 88 in the 2020 Tokyo games. More than 23,000 women finished the 2023 New York Marathon, 371 over the age of 65, nine in their 80s. There was a time, maybe five years ago, when I might have pulled it off. The urge still taunts and tugs at me, but I know I don't have the speed, strength, or stamina. What I do have is the good sense to recognize my limits.

Mile 12: "Good job," we shout to each other as we pass or are passed during these last miles. Our numbers have dwindled — most of the racers have crossed the line and collected their medals, but we're the stalwarts, young and old, slow but sure. Thumbs up to a lone walker: "Only two more miles." "Hang in there — you've got this" to those shuffling, straggling, struggling.

Mile 13: We cross a bridge that puts us within sight of the finish. My mind flashes on the last time I did this race, four years ago, when my calves seized up with cramps, and I limped through this, the last, the hardest, the longest mile. I push out the doubt and focus on my step, still strong, all body parts in sync. “Hang in there — you’ve got this,” I tell myself.

13.1: I cross the finish a little after three and a quarter hours (minus several seconds). The announcer calls me “80 years young.” He means well, intends it as high praise, but I’m not young. I’m 80 years old and proud of it; I want full credit for my achievement. My pace of 14:40 is my slowest half, but I feel strong, victorious, reassured. I make note of the date of next year’s race. I can still do this.

Alice Lowe writes about life, language, food, and family in San Diego, California. Her essays are widely published, including this past year in *Big City Lit*, *South 85 Journal*, *Change Seven*, *Words & Sports*, *Tangled Locks*, and *ManifestStation*. This is her second publication in *Sport Literate*. Alice is a devoted Yankees fan and a new convert to women’s soccer, having attended her first San Diego Wave match. Read and reach her at www.aliceloweblogs.wordpress.com.

SL

Poetry

Roadside Encounter

Robert Brickhouse

An old-timer in gym shorts
out jogging the streets for exercise
I was stopped by a tough-looking young flagger
holding back traffic for a work crew
to maneuver machinery. Stretching, trotting in place,
I figured he was indifferent to my little regime
or, more likely, resentful of some dude
in white sneakers with time to be sweating for fun
while others jackhammered and hauled
to mend water lines for the town.

The flagman swiveled his signal
for me and a few cars to pass through.
Arms iron-pumped, shoulders tattooed,
snapback cap cocked, he stared
over us in his blaze-orange vest, sunglasses.
Just a kid, with an uncertain future. Certainly bored,
underpaid to keep us all safe.

To slip past, come face to face,
I knew I had to say something.
Pointing to his sign, I said “that’s me — Slow.”

His answer stayed with me all day.
No, no, you’re doing great!

Robert Brickhouse, has contributed poetry and fiction to many magazines and journals over the years, among them the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Southern Poetry Review*, the *American Journal of Poetry*, *Poet Lore*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Texas Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Light Quarterly*. Now retired, he worked for many years as a reporter for Virginia newspapers and as a writer and editor for publications at the University of Virginia.