Running Jogs the Academic Mind

By Don Troop

As I run I tell myself to think of a river. And clouds. But essentially I’m not thinking of a thing.

—Haruki Murakami

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running

Lynn G. Beck was jogging along the levee of the Calaveras River two years ago when a surge of endorphins and oxygen helped her solve a knotty problem that had been troubling her for months.

As dean of the school of education at the University of the Pacific, she and others in her office had been spending an inordinate amount of time trying to recruit more qualified students. She says she wasn’t thinking about recruitment, or anything in particular, when the solution suddenly came to her.

"I thought, 'Lynn, you need to invest in a person who will be dedicated to this, someone who will take this to the next level.'"

The provost agreed that Ms. Beck could tap discretionary funds from the school’s endowment, so she hired a full-time student recruiter, a move that helped triple her school’s freshman enrollment over two years.

It was a classic "Eureka!" moment, an experience common to runners and other athletes who work their bodies and let their minds wander.

Legend has it that the Greek mathematician Archimedes was luxuriating in the tub, resting body and mind, when he gave the phenomenon its name. The density (and authenticity) of the king’s new crown, he suddenly realized, could be determined by submerging it and then measuring the volume of water it displaced. Archimedes, the story goes, bolted stark naked from the public bath, shouting, "Eureka! Eureka!" ("I've found it!").

To the relief of campus police agencies and students everywhere, college professors and administrators react more calmly when their own brainstorms roll in. In fact, interviews with more than a dozen
academics who regularly run suggest that while exercise relaxes their minds and greases their neural passageways, most of the resulting ideas are either incremental steps toward something larger or, as one runner calls them, "mini-eureka moments."

Wolfgang Ketterle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a physics Nobelist in 2001, said via e-mail that when he is running, he goes "too fast to have energy to solve difficult problems in my mind. :)" He told Runner's World magazine last year: "I haven't made any big discoveries on a run, but it does give me time to think through problems. Some solutions are obvious, but they are only obvious when you are relaxed enough to find them. Running is like decompressing and cleaning up your mind. Your body is busy and your mind is free."

Beth M. Huebner, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, says that while she has never had what she would call a true "aha! moment on the run," marathon training helps her find solutions to murky situations in both her research and her work as director of the department's graduate program. She says she has some of her most mentally productive moments—like visualizing how a paper or manuscript should be organized—after clearing her mind through vigorous exercise.

Religious "pilgrims have long understood this," says Sarah Barringer Gordon, a professor of history and constitutional law at the University of Pennsylvania and an avid runner. "You have to exhaust the physical self first. You really have to get kind of empty, and then it all roars in." Ms. Gordon says that every chapter of her new book, The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America (Harvard University Press, 2010), contains an insight gained on one of her long runs.

"Meditative" is how Daniel H. Weiss describes his daily runs around the track at Lafayette College. "I'll bring a project in my head that I'm going to think through," says the president, who runs early in the morning precisely because most people don't. "It's nice to run with other people, it's pleasant, but I value that time alone to work through my thoughts."

Others prefer more-companionable brainstorming. William J. Pierce is director of the Furman Institute of Running and Scientific Training, at Furman University, and a co-author of Run Less, Run Faster. The book, which some runners have embraced as a bible of sorts, calls for three nonconsecutive run days a week interspersed with cycling or swimming days. The running consists of a day of
speed workouts on the track, a day of "focused" running (five to seven miles), and then a day of long running (10 to 20 miles).

It is on those long runs that Mr. Pierce, his brother, and one of the book's other authors have enjoyed most of their eureka moments, pumped out like so much sweat while running seven-and-a-half-minute miles. The institute's "First" acronym, he says, came to them.

"In the first half of the run there's a lot of creativity and ideas," Mr. Pierce says. "I'll admit that in the second half of the run there's not as much conversation."

Road conversations, he says, are more free-form and productive than the usual meeting. "If you are sitting down, there's a worry about offending people" when an idea lands with a thud.

Robin Marra, a professor of political science and director of the Polling Institute, at Franklin Pierce University, says he was out for a run when he had an epiphany about the key role that independent voters would play in the outcome of New Hampshire's 2000 presidential primaries. Scrutinizing the opinions of that group of voters, his was one of only two polls to accurately predict that John McCain would defeat George W. Bush by double figures in the GOP contest.

A self-described slow runner, Mr. Marra would win anyone's award for durability. Until last year, he had run once a day for 24 years, eight months, and 11 days in a row—that's 9,020 consecutive days—ending his streak only because he had to get open-heart surgery. Even at that, he knocked out a four-miler the night before going under the knife. Then, after a 69-day hiatus, he was back at it, running in all kinds of weather, on some days going out even before the snowplows had pushed aside the deep New Hampshire drifts.

He's already on his way to a new streak, he says: "In the year 2034, I'll break the streak again. I'll be 81 then."