

“From Tearing a Tendon to Mending My Ways.” Messenger [Enfield, NH] 20 Aug. 1997

From *Short Stories of an Outdoor Enthusiast: Never say I wish I had.* by Stephen L. Priest

Introduction

Have you ever thought about sleeping overnight in a snow hut in the middle of the wilderness? How about running a marathon? What about canoeing through white water, visiting a Shaker museum, or attending a lecture on alternative medicine therapies?

The Beginning and the Opportunity: A Torn Achilles Tendon

An enthusiast needs to start somewhere. I was a couch potato absorbed with the pressures and problems of work, and had no real commitment to exercise.

Maybe it all started with the good fortune of tearing my Achilles tendon. I was playing basketball in a pick-up game when suddenly it felt as if someone had hit me in the back of my ankle. Nobody was there.

The healing process was not smooth. There was a noticeable indentation where the tear had taken place, and the medical opinion was that surgery would not help. I was told there was a fifty - fifty chance that the tendon would tear again.

The First Mile

This is not a running treatise. Yet, for me, running was the revelation that opened the door to both outdoor and intellectual challenges. One day, about a year after my injury, I decided I had to do something about my 200-pound weight and lethargy. I put on my ten-year-old ankle-high army combat boots, reminiscing about boot camp and its daily mandate to hit the road running. Then I went out and ran - maybe limped is a better word - the distance between two telephone poles. Even though I was breathing heavily and perspiring profusely, it somehow felt good, despite the sensitive tendon.

The next day I put my boots back on, and this time ran the distance between three telephone poles. Although I did not know it at the time, my quest had begun.

I continued extending my distances pole by telephone pole. I was very concerned that my Achilles tendon might tear, but I weighed this against returning to inactivity. After two weeks I ran to the end of my street without stopping - about a third of a mile.

I next dreamed of completing one mile. I came close to doing a neighborhood loop many times during the fifth week, but I would end up walking. Each day at work, I would picture myself accomplishing the mile. Every evening I would be determined

to run the one-mile route, only to end up walking. Finally, after week six, my quest was reached!

I ran this daily mile - usually six days a week - for nearly two years, with no thought of extending my distance.

One day I read about a seven-mile race in the local newspaper. The race was four weeks away. Daring to dream that perhaps I could finish this distance, I extended my daily run until I was able to do two laps of the mile loop. Doubling my distance took only one week. I set my next goal at four miles. Within two weeks I accomplished it. It was now time to enter my first race.

I had envisioned all participants as skinny and young. Instead there were men and women, young and old, and people in all types of physical shape. Naively, I thought that I surely would finish in front of the older and overweight athletes. Well, I got an education. After a quarter of a mile, not only was I at the back of the pack, I was at least one hundred yards behind the next runner.

At approximately five miles I found myself running side by side with a woman - we were the last two racers. I was sure she had slowed because I knew I was in no condition to speed up. We talked about our jobs and our families - anything to help forget the pain we were both experiencing. With about a mile to go she suggested we pick up our speed to the finish. She sped up, with my blessings, and I was the last runner to cross the finish line.

My tendon never did re-tear, although it never regained its previous strength and form. My limp is now hardly noticeable and does not hinder any of my activities.

“I wish I had”

This first challenge accomplished, I began to recognize outdoor and athletic activities that had previously been invisible to me.

And these activities carried over to intellectual curiosities. I began to visit museums, simply because I knew nothing about them. I began attending lectures simply to learn about something I did not know. If tearing my tendon made me recognize the limits of my knowledge and appreciation, the pain and struggle of recuperation have been worth it. Meeting the challenge has enlarged my life.

Steve Priest resides in Bedford, New Hampshire. This is an excerpt from Steve’s book, **Short Stories of an Outdoor Enthusiast: “Never say I wish I had.”** Additional pieces from the manuscript can be found at www.outdoorsteve.com (click **Seeking a Publisher**).