

GEORGE SHEEHAN'S



VIEWPOINT

KING OF THE HILL

Conquering hills brings out your best and truest self

For me and about 100 other runners, the annual Bahrs Five-Mile Run is one of the special races of the year. Only when I'm out of town have I missed the Bahrs race, held on the third Sunday in May in Highlands, New Jersey. What primarily attracts me and my fellow regulars to Bahrs every year is the tough course. And I suspect that's exactly what keeps other runners away.

With good reason. It begins at a dock landing on the Shrewsbury River across from Sandy Hook, a flat spit of land at the



entrance of lower New York Bay. The course then ascends for 1 mile to the highest point on the Atlantic Coast.

Next comes a mile downhill until the runners reach the Navesink River. Then they go upriver about a half-mile, turn and retrace their steps. Another ascent of the hill and a long downhill leads to the finish.

The most difficult race of the season is followed by the best party. Bahrs is a restaurant, and runners share steamed clams, chowder, hot dogs and beer until the awards ceremony finally takes place.

Those of us who are regulars go for all these reasons. A beautiful but highly demanding course, a small field and the feast afterward. The familiar sequence of play,

pain and party at its best.

I approached last year's Bahrs Five with trepidation. I recently had had the experience of being last in a race, and I realized this could be the first race shorter than a marathon that I didn't finish.

The initial ascent caused a just-tolerable level of pain in my thighs as I groaned and gasped all the way to the peak. The downhill was easy, as long as I paid attention to the rocky surface. Then onto the turn. Heading back, I realized I was essentially the last competitor in the race. Two or three people behind me chatted comfortably, apparently in no hurry to get to the finish line.

Then came the final ascent. The demands of running uphill are enormous. I recall telling my cardiac patients that climbing stairs is nine times the effort of walking on the flat. I remembered that fact as I tried to bring my back foot ahead of my front foot. My stride, if I could call it that, became shorter and shorter. Then and there I made an irrevocable decision—I was not going to walk. In the past, winning meant, "I didn't quit"; today it would be, "I didn't walk."

I was tempted to be sure. After all, at that point I could walk almost as fast as I could run. And if I did walk, the temporary rest would set me up for a surge to the summit. I even reminded myself that the legendary barefoot psychiatrist Charley Robbins had always said that a runner would save time by walking the hills.

But I refused to listen to this internal dialogue. No matter what happened I was not going to walk. By now I was not simply in pain, I was pain. Only knowing that this escalating torture would end made it bearable—similar, I imagine, to being burned at the stake.

The torture did end and then came the rejuvenation of the long downhill to the finish. Perhaps that is the great attraction of the Bahrs race. The terrible suffering up the second ascent yields a rebirth running down the slope. It was the good me, me at my best, who finished nearly last.

The great preacher Phillips Brooks once said, your highest moments are your truest moments. The time you are at your best is the real you.

If you run the Bahrs Five, you'll believe it. ■