

Ode to a forgotten cross country course

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Belmont Plateau, part of Philadelphia's expansive Fairmont Park, is one of the most well known and challenging high school and college cross country courses in the United States. The high school course was originally designed at 2.3 miles and in 1974 was extended to 2.9 miles, and then to 3.1 miles (5k) in 1989. The "old" college course was originally designed as a 5-mile course. (Many competitive X runners who ran this course swear to this day that it's longer.) In 1999 the men's college course was redesigned significantly; it is now an 8,000 meter course and much less challenging. A few reasons have been given for this change; one that continues to create the most discussion is that coaches across the country stopped bringing their collegiate teams here because the course was just too hard for their precious runners, opting instead to have them run races against other runners, but certainly not run against the course itself. The old women's college course was set at 3 miles and extended to 3,000 meters in 1999. "Belmont" or "The Plateau," which it is affectionately called, is one of the most historic and fabled cross country sites in the U.S and possibly worldwide. It is a real cross country course; one that suits what this sport was made for...Naturally Belmont served the needs of the Philadelphia Public School District cross country league and the Philadelphia Catholic (schools) League. The Big 5 college championship meets were held here as were the Mid-Atlantic (collegiate) Conference, East Coast Conference, and today the Atlantic 10 Conference champs. The course also hosted many grade school, high school, and college tournaments, invitationals, and even one national college cross country championship. Over the years, Belmont has helped define the meaning of cross country for countless runners, would be runners, and those who wished they had never run cross but know deep down inside that they are better for it. (Information taken, in part, from "The Informal History of Cross Country at Belmont Plateau," Dave Thomas editor at

<http://www.gopacsports.com/BelmontPlateau.html>



Belmont Plateau: A photo of Philadelphia's center city skyline taken from The Flag Pole spot about 50 yards from Front Hill on the cross country course. This grassy plateau scene is the better part of the first mile "Front Loop" of this historic cross country course. Runners enter The Woods from the left of the photo.

The St. Joseph's University "Celebration of Cross Country," sponsored by their Alumni Track Club (27 October 2007), appropriately began with the running of the Atlantic 10 Conference men's and women's cross country championship at Belmont Plateau (Philadelphia, PA). These collegiate runners, however, did not run the 5-miles (plus) college cross country course that many Hawk harriers recall covering during their days competing for St. Joe's.

In between the Atlantic 10 Conference Cross Country Championship and the Philadelphia Catholic League champs, I invited my niece (a 26-year old tri-athlete) to run the "old college course." We began with the Front Hill Loop and Parachute Hill sections which I told her are essentially the same. We began the run on that spray-painted line. I noted to her that about 50 yards from the start you would hear spikes sliding across an asphalt road just before Front Hill. (Where did this road come from?) I explained to her that at the crest of Front Hill was where you first noticed all of the other runners breathing; then the sharp turn left off of Front Hill. The sight of the center city buildings from Flag Pole was the first opportunity for any mental displacement on the course. Yes we are in one of the historically largest cities in the U.S., but William Penn envisioned a city in a park. The [baseball] Backstops and rare flat section of the course was replete with football players. I know it's counterintuitive that there are no baseball or softball players on these fields but Cross Country means that autumn is here. Summer is a time to get ready for cross; if not, you will pay...

Upon approaching "The Mile Mark" I had to annotate that there are several first-mile marks on this course depending on the coach, as each high school or college coach had a different rationale for the mile mark, i.e. which one had the most mentally strategic utility. It's amazing how these men had an acute sense of distance on a track but lost all perspective of distance when it came to 1,760 yards on a cross country course.

We went into "The Woods" and with each step my niece sensed that something big was about to happen...I noted that these softly rolling mounds are the most serene section of the course, given their playful dips, the coolness in the air, the brush with nature, but that this was the calm before the storm.

We ran down the final section of the gateway to The Woods; the sun reappears and marks the spot of the sharp left turn up Parachute Hill. Up, up, up we went on Parachute. My niece, reverting to her tri-athlete frame of reference, said that Parachute reminded her of a steep wave about to break; if you don't move fast enough to get behind it, you will be tumbled by the white water break. I said that Parachute is no place to be holding your breath; keep swimming... She had a point though; you put Parachute behind you by any means necessary.

At the top of Parachute I instinctively ran to "The Road." "What is this drop to the right that they concocted?" I am not going there. We cut our way through the brush to "The Road." Now what? Do we run on the narrow dirt/grass section to the right, or in the cobblestone drain, or do we run in the actual street and risk a brush with a car? "Where

do you run if you are wearing spikes?” she asked. “Who said running cross country is not a technical sport,” I responded. When does this road end?

We made the sharp turn right to get to “The Back Side of Parachute.” This is the steep downhill. My niece was talking to me; I heard nothing. I had flashbacks down the back of Parachute Hill of all the guys who stumbled, twisted, skipped, tripped, and fell--on backsides, hips, knees... some spread eagle and some as if they were sliding head first into second base. How could downhill be so challenging; wasn't this downhill supposed to be the breather? My niece understandably was impressed with the challenging terrain. As you can imagine, I could confidently say to her at about the 2-mile mark : “You ain't seen nothing yet.”

When we entered the woods to the *real college course*, an odd sensation came over me; I knew that something was wrong. We handled quite easily the rolling mounds just before Sprinter's Hollow, but the path seemed quite narrow. While the beauty of Belmont, especially the college course, has always been running on a surface where nature can take her course, I could tell that these cross country paths have been less and less traveled today.

I explained Sprinter's Hollow and had to apologize for the more than usual urban debris in the middle of the path. When we approached the footbridge, the adrenaline began to pump, and I told her about the screams that you could hear well before you saw any coaches or spectators. She did hesitate to step onto the bridge, as it looked less stable and I wondered whether it could take the “step, step, step, step” pounding that swung us by this exciting section of the course. You heard the crowds screaming encouraging words and among the din you heard clearly what your coach was saying, whether you liked it or not.

The next down shoots were much steeper than I remember. Here you could use a shoot to go down, but to get back I wondered if we would need a ladder. We approached the Tunnel; it seemed much darker and lower. The straightaway toward SureKill (Shurk) was less inspiring; not sure why.

At this point, what else was I to say to prepare her for SureKill hill? To my embarrassment, I could not locate the SureKill. All I could see now was brush and more brush. I took us as far as this path would go. To the right of us was the Schuylkill Expressway. To the left looked to be the downside of SureKill, but I was not sure. Straight ahead was barely a path. Could this be the way to the big hill?

After running several small circles, each recon to no avail, we ventured to the straight ahead path. By using a little imagination, I could sense that maybe this was the way to get to the infamous Hill. The path was overgrown. I could sense that my niece was not going to follow; she had lost faith in her uncle and would be satisfied with just the stories-- Thank you very much!-- about SureKill. I would be accused of contributing to urban runners' legend. The old man is no longer living in reality.

But taking one last leap of faith, I found the bottom turn of SureKill. “This is it!” I began to attack the hill and she implored me to slow up-- just a little. I explained the paradox of the hill. Yes, this is the deepest part of the college cross country course, but the one area where an overenthusiastic coach has somehow found a way to disturb our sanctuary in these woods. He had taken the opportunity to get into your face and pull you up the hill with an encouraging voice: “rhythm, rhythm, rhythm, rhythm....” Nobody dared to look back on this Hill; the climb out of hell would be easier. Where’s the daylight? Look up...Where’s the daylight?

I explained the strategy for running the flat off of SureKill; the one I heard from Mike Glavin my freshman year was to use a combination of breathing and stepping that helps shake the lactic acid from your legs and gets you onto the meandering street. (Mike Glavin, St. Joe’s 1975-78, is the only runner to defeat Sidney Maree, Villanova runner and U.S. Olympian, on Belmont.) This short street section was where those with spikes were forced back on their heels and those with flats tried to squeeze just a little strategic advantage.

Having been redeemed from a near misstep, I was fooled once more. Where is the back of SureKill? “I know it was right here.” We could only see overgrown fields with eye level stuff that you would only feed to a scare crow. But we ventured on...

I am not sure if we ran the back part along the same path as we did so many times in competition, but we eventually came to see the Tunnel again. We started back out of the Woods.

Back up the shoots; dipping and turning on another playful part of the course. Back over the Footbridge; it is quiet this time. Where did everyone go?

We made the right, instead of the off left, which would take you back to Sprinter’s Hollow. This was counterintuitive to my saying that we simply reverse out of the woods. I told her that we had yet one more little hill inside the Woods called “Nursery Hill,” which I always thought was called nursery because it really did not qualify as a hill--relative to the mature hills on this course. It was not until senior year that I was told that it was Nursery Hill because of the flora and fauna nursery set back from the hill.

As we came out of the deep sections of the Woods to the back side of Parachute, she asked if we would run Parachute again. I asked her if she wanted to run Parachute again. Not surprising, we plodded happily past the base of Parachute. As we moved out The Woods my niece said that I was picking up the pace a bit. The mantra came back to me: “Nobody passes you on the last mile; nobody....Nobody passes you over the last mile, nobody.”

The Catholic League Championship races were about to begin, so we did not run Front Hill again. At that point, I noticed that my niece was bleeding on several places of her arms and legs. I drew this to her attention. She looked a little startled, then looked at me and said: “Uncle Stephen, you are bleeding all over your legs too.”

After running the *real college course* at Belmont Plateau, it would not be unusual for a cross country runner to be scraped, bumped, and possibly to have fallen which would cause some blood from the run. It is sad that if anyone who has run this fabled course in the day were to run it now, he should be prepared not only to shed some blood, but also some tears for the pitiful neglect and disuse of a great college cross country course. There are cross country courses in the U.S and there is the old Belmont Plateau course.

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