

April a time for poetry, renewal

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

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"April is the cruelest month," writes T.S. Eliot in the opening of "The Waste Land." I disagree.

I lean more toward Geoffrey Chaucer's opening of "The Canterbury Tales": "In April the sweet showers fall / And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all / The veins are bathed in liquor of such power" (1-3, translated from Middle English by Nevill Coghill).

Why poetry about April in this running column?

April is National Poetry Month, sponsored by The Academy of American Poets (poets.org), and this is my annual running column on poetry.

I worked on this column on Thursday morning into my third mile of a six-miler along the banks of the Old Brazos River. I first came up with a parody of Poe's "The Raven" in which that bird of ill-omen visits and proclaims that I shall "Nevermore" see the mediocre speed I had in my 40s and 50s. I tossed that draft aside as I sat at my computer to crunch out this column Friday morning.

The well-trained, elite athlete is physiological poetry, a well sculptured sonnet, an ode to physical fitness, an exciting narrative poem.

"On the flat road runs the well train'd runner," writes Walt Whitman in "The Runner." "He is lean and sinewy with muscular legs."

We mediocre, middle-to-back-of-the-pack athletes are more like the runners in "The Song of the Ungirt Runners" by Charles Hamilton Sorley: "We swing ungirted hips, / And lightened are our eyes; ... We do not run for prize /... we run because we like it."

We are athletes who, in the words of Thomas Gray in his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," run "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" and realize "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Running brings tranquility to average runners in the profound moments we experience a runner's high, though we might reach that level infrequently. Many of our runs are routine, and sometimes we struggle in our physical fitness regimens.

William Wordsworth said that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility" in his second preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802. Wordsworth's words best describe the profound experience of my running highs:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with
the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense
sublime,
Of something far more deeply
interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of
setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living
air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind
of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of
all thought,
And rolls through all things.
(*"Tintern Abbey"* 93-102).

We average runners experience not the poetry in motion of the fast, famed and elite. We experience joyful running, which to some is an oxymoron. We know, in fact, not all runs are joyful.

But April is a joyful month, an almost perfect month for running, a time for renewal. Running can be a poetic experience. While you relax after a run or in the quiet of the night, read a poem in celebration of poetry month.

Carpe diem! Revel in spring-green runs and the power of poetry.

Running footnotes:
Don't forget the Flapjack 5K in

downtown Freeport on Saturday. And for the real "legs of sinew" runners, the San Jacinto Festival 5K is Sunday in West Columbia. I shall be at the starting lines of both spring-green runs. ... The Brazosport Area Road Runners Association meets next Monday, April 24, at 6:30 p. m., at Riverpoint Restaurant in Lake Jackson. All runners and walkers and those interested in physical fitness are welcome.

Bill Shaw's running column appears every other Monday.