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but the very feel of it’

He has run in some of the most spectacular places on the planet, but it's a route from his formative running years that remains closest to Adharanand Finn's heart



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HE VIEW IS NOT SO SPECTACULAR THESE DAYS. After running ultramarathons through the Alps and across the desert in Oman, Sywell reservoir in Northamptonshire feels a little on the modest side. Nonetheless, for me, as I set out at a jog, following the rolling path clockwise along its eastern edge, the familiar iron railings and wheat fields flickering by to one side and the still expanse of water to the other, the air is heavy with nostalgia.

My mind is already flitting back through memories, each step I take imbued with the feeling of countless runs along this slice of English countryside. The gravel path extends further now than it used to. I remember the feeling of reaching the end and stepping onto the narrow dirt trail. In those days I would feel an irresistible urge to begin cranking up through the gears here, as though I'd shot off the end of a ramp. The warm-up was done; it was time to go.

The first time I came here, I was about six years old and I walked the entire way around with my parents. It took the whole day and felt like an epic quest that lodged forever in my mind, as though we had traversed Middle Earth.

I don't exactly remember when I next came here, but by then I had started running. I was about 13 or 14 and I was racing cross-country and track for my local athletics club. It seemed smaller that second time, but no less enticing. And perfect for training. One lap of the reservoir was about three miles, if you went the long way, avoiding the wooden walkway that made a shortcut through the reeds at the northern end. Not that I ever measured it. There was no Strava back then and I didn't even own a watch. But measurements were unimportant. I would just hit the trail and start running hard. Always hard. And by the end I was exhausted and happy. That was all that counted.

I used to run around Sywell reservoir at least once most weeks, whenever my parents went there for a walk. My routine was to jog the first 100m or so until the end of the laid path and then, bam, I was off. I didn't know anything about trail shoes in those days and this first section could often be muddy and slippery, so sometimes I would have to hold back on the pace for a little longer as I slid around and detoured through the long grass for the next half a mile or so.

I can still recall the smells of the different seasons. Hazy memories of crunching through frost in winter, hands warm in my yellow running gloves, the lake frozen, the crows' nests visible in the bare trees, the head of a swan poking up from the reeds; in summer, the ground baked hard, a swamping heat rising from the earth, the smell of mud; or the fresh cool of the evening, the light dimming, running through clouds of flies. I'd always end up swallowing one.

And there were always dogs, of course. 'He just likes to play, he won't hurt you,' as a great big mouth bounded towards me. 'Come here, Baxter!' I've never been good at handling dogs on my runs, but they were a hazard everywhere. At least on the open trails of Sywell, I could see them coming in good time.

At first I used to run one lap, a pulsating charge, with the trail on the final section – if I ran clockwise, which I usually did – rolling delightfully in quick hills that you could charge down, then the momentum carrying you up the next small rise, before rushing down again. I'd be sprinting by this point, secretly delighting at the surprised faces of the walkers as I went by.


As I got older, I'd go for two laps. But I'd still push the pace. In those days I thought that every run had to be flat out; otherwise, it was a waste of time. I wasn't trying to break any best time, or beat any segment records. I never even timed myself. That was just what running was to me: a flat-out effort. I should have called it charging.

I enjoyed the shocked expressions of people as I passed them a second time, my mind working out how little they had walked in the time I'd done a full lap. They'd often look confused, or even say it out loud: 'That was quick!' or 'You again!?' I was almost disappointed if they seemed not to notice, and I'd up my speed.

There's a half-mile section through a small woodland that I particularly loved. Again, the path here dipped and curved. I'd often run hardest of all on this section. I can still feel the cold air in my lungs, the smell of the foliage, the thrill of the tight turns, the trees rushing past – and then through a gate and back out onto the open space of grassland beside the water. A moment to catch my breath before the final push.

As we got older, my younger brothers would often join me. On trips home from university, I'd ask if I could borrow the car. 'Are you going to Sywell?' my parents would ask. Of course. That was the only reason I ever borrowed the car. My parents lived fairly near the centre of Northampton, but within 10 minutes we were out in the countryside, stretching and limbering up on the shores of our lake, the path leading off in both directions, a frisson of nervous anticipation in my stomach, ready for another burn-up. My brothers would hang with me as long as they could, straining to keep up. It was never a social jog.

These days, I've learned to run more slowly, taking in my surroundings as I go. But somehow, despite never consciously coming to Sywell to run for the landscape, or to appreciate nature, and never running slowly enough to deliberately take it in, every step of the path is burned into my memory, not just visually, but the very feel of it; the contours of the earth, the bits where it dips sharply, or where the track is more rutted, the crunch of the path along the top of the dam, the sound of those crows cawing in the trees. When you run fast, you cease to become an observer of the landscape – you become part of it. You begin to merge with it, like an animal on the run, moving through it, senses alert, heightened by the speed of the movement.

Although I was always racing along, pushing myself to some unknown end (for some unquantifiable reason), the whole time I was absorbing everything. That's why it holds so many feelings, so many memories. Not particular moments, or particular runs, just a deep sense of place, as though part of me, part of my youth, still lingers in the air on the shores of that innocuous reservoir in Northamptonshire. 

Adharanand Finn is the author of *The Rise of the Ultra Runners* and *The Way of the Runner*.



ILLUSTRATIONS: JASON LYON