

The Day I SnowShoed For The Prickly Pear

Phillip Gary Smith

The odds are high I don't have to tell you, a reader of SnowShoe Magazine, the physical benefits of snowshoeing, so I'm not going there. You can relax about that.

If I were to talk about the animal advantages of burning 500 calories per hour, running on soft, forgiving surfaces, handling different challenges than a boring exercise session in other related sports, well, you would have tuned out already and never ventured this far -- because you know those things, you don't need reminding, thank you very much. You're likely a tuned, if not a highly tuned, athlete with lots of experience in multi-sports.

Those important benefits were only a minor reason I rolled out of bed at 3:45 AM on a recent Saturday morning in Minnesota. I needed to solve a problem, and there is no better place or way than to get my answer while plowing through snow trails. In July I would have done it in one of the many long trails offered in or near the Twin Cities, working out my challenge in the solitude of the woods.

This is January, though, and even with the mildest of winters, or better stated, 'The Most Boring Winter' for what seems like ever, I'm headed out to a practice area for my snowshoeing -- a local school with a great north facing hill and room to create a nice loop at the bottom so I can do an 8 minute cycle. It's warm, too, for this soon after New Years' Day; temperatures reaching levels we shouldn't enjoy until Mother Nature annually loosens her grip a little during a much anticipated winter thaw, typically in February. Not the whole blessed winter, though, like this one.

But with a 30 degree temperature, and of course it's dark except for distant ambient lighting from the school parking, comfortable is the word as I insert my Montrails into the Atlas 'Speed Demons' I call those racing snowshoes I have. Getting out of the truck I find quickly I've overdressed, even though I checked the NOAA weathercast that broadcasts all night on our local Comcast cable channel #13. But it's January, and it's supposed to be cold; over dressing has nothing to do with the fact that it isn't cold, but from my years of programming that insists I should be bundled up, it's January! Little does it matter I will get hot once I start moving those snowshoes with silent propulsion.

I had very recently suffered one of those problems that crop up every decade or so where a challenge is artificially created for you, one that really eats away at your insides. There's no need to describe it since this kind of Prickly Pear has many faces, many ways of doing so, and any description only would trivialize the challenge, cheapening it. Whether at the plant, office, home, school. . . we all run into this kind of cactus, or will.

I stepped in this particular Prickly Pear patch by odd circumstance. And there isn't any desert in Minnesota. Barren? at times. Bogs? yes, plenty; but no desert.

A wacky Prickly Pear, so blatantly exhibited, sears. Professionally I tuck it below the surface, but later it boils right up.

So I'm going out on the trail, it's now Saturday morning, to practice my

snowshoeing, but I know I will come to grips with my particular emotions by being in the snow, on the trail. I'm starting my stint at about 4:30 A.M doing my 8 minute loops. Down the big hill, zig zagging around the flat field on a repeating course, then up 'big' to complete the circuit. Down, zig-zag around, Up. Repeat, and keep repeating.

My mind covers lots of subjects, but I keep going over and over the Prickly Pear, responding in my mind, explaining, pretending exchanges that begin to express my now rage, private as it might be. Keeping it to myself, out by myself on a new little circuit; remember, never let 'em see you sweat I read once.

Round and round I go, snowshoeing to beat the band. Now 2 1/2 hours have passed, and my ham strings are fried, calves are tight, lungs are empty. No walking up the hill, one bounds up until gravity and God says, 'You better walk now, son.' So I finish session One.

I come to the conclusion the Prickly Pear had morphed into a kind of jackass jelly.

Sunday Morning, 5:00 A.M., I'm back out. I am utilizing the strategy of training for an ultra trail event where you do a long run one day, and the very next you go right back at it, but with a shorter time frame and perhaps a little less velocity. Doing so simulates the heaviness of legs and a sense of being worn out on those long, long trail sessions. Maybe even visiting some of those 'demons' that a trail friend, Maynard, talks about appearing in ultra length treks. Training, and trying to replicate a long endurance event but with snowshoes.

Same course, a little less snow now since the temps reached a balmy 40 degrees the prior afternoon, the North facing 'course' I've made being protected from a full melt. How weird is this! There have been July 4th celebrations in Minnesota where it felt 40 degrees.

I've decided to drink my cherry e-fuel electrolyte, my favorite, after 1 hour both days, along with an Oatmeal Clif Bar. They really perk one up.

Realizations begin flooding me. It occurs to me, while snowshoeing in the dark, getting all of the advantages of snowshoeing, being relaxed, my problem really isn't one at all. The deal is: the actions of the Prickly Pear reflected an immaturity. Looking back on this, the PP will realize remorse while swaying in the desert wind at some point in the future.

And when I arrive at that estimation, 1½ hours into session Two, I stopped. I was done.

A sense of calm swept over me with fresh recognition this wasn't an issue at all, but rather a maturity matter for the Prickly Pear.

Maturity happens.

If I had used a local Bar, for example, as a method of solving this situation, maybe a 1970's kind of solution, I probably could have found plenty of agreeing company, one cocktail after another, and I would have left in bad shape, with any solution reached being highly suspect. Prickly Pears can hurt your health if you allow.

It was only because I took the Prickly Pear on my Snow Shoe trek did I really find the solution. The solitude of the trail set right in the midst of suburbia, the beauty of the white, even with plenty of melted brown showing; at night, with peace, calm, and heavy breathing ridded myself of the anxiety . . . and magically gave me the answer.

I wrote in my book, “ULTRA SUPERIOR,” that one can solve their problems on the trail, and I named it ‘Dr. Trail.’ You won’t need ‘Dr. Phil’ anymore, I felt. If everyone who has a Prickly Pear that comes sticking in their life could, or would, snowshoe, I’m pretty convinced that their problems would melt away like the ice debris on the edge of your Atlas or Tubbs laid out in the back of the truck.

The first time I ever heard the word ‘prickly pear,’ back in the 1970’s on an inaugural trip to Tucson, Arizona, I tried an ice cream made from that cactus. I really thought there might be a bite from it, not having to do with flavor, but the ‘stickers’ associated with the plant. Turned out, the ice cream was delightful, fresh, and cool. Maybe it even had a matured flavor.

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