

How to Be a Runner

Find yourself staring at the joggers as they pass by on a crisp Sunday morning, chatting away, gesticulating with their hands. Notice how the sun reflects a thin layer of sweat on their arms but not their legs. Think back to when sixth-grade P.E. coach, Mr. Fascist made you run laps for talking in line. You may have developed the anti-running gene right then, the one that had lodged itself in some moveable joint for all those years. Get the feeling that these runners were actually *enjoying* it.

See them at the park, on the sidewalk, on the grassy boulevard meridian in their willowy shorts and long tights. Ubiquitous wind-up figures going everywhere, going nowhere. Sometimes in small packs, other times alone—what was the point?

Go to a meeting of local runners. Because you were bored, you convinced yourself. They don't all look like Dachau survivors or hunger strike victims. More than a few are big-boned, even...thick. Someone introduces himself as Skip. He tells you that clichéd joke about being a social drinking club with a running problem. You ask him if that's his real name or a call sign. He hands you a beer and says you have nice gastrocnemius muscles. At some point the members get serious and a hush goes over the room. You realize the speaker has brought up the subject of injuries. Heads are bowed. You hear the word plantar faciitis and wonder if it's fatal. You like these people. They are as weird as you.

Make plans to join the “meet for a run group” but then skip it and sneak off to the park in your hooded sweatshirt and multi-sport sneakers. Run the perimeter once and have flashbacks to sixth grade. Run it twice and hate that coach. By the fourth lap you are sweating profusely, your knees hurt but you fail to notice because you are making plans to run by the coach's house and pee in his bushes.

Find a running store and end up spending your entire lunch hour learning about pronation, supination and sublimated spandex. There were a dozen guys just hanging around like they were waiting for something to happen. You couldn't tell the sales people from the slackers from the sponsored runners. They sat on couches and drank soft drinks and made jokes. Was this some kind of tree-fort for adults?

Come back the next day and tell them a joke. The sales person gives you 10% off on a pair of shoes that you wear out the door. Feel airy. Feel sponsored. Avoid mud.

Up your mileage. Up it again.

Begin a running log, a kind of acceptable diary for the obsessive-compulsive. Begin with weekly mileage and inch your way up to workout types, caloric intake, weather conditions and something metaphysical that you write in code. Stop short of keeping your journals in a safe deposit box.

Think nothing of the six (Or is it 8?) pair of running shoes that now inhabit your front porch. They have become like old friends, soldiered to your daily efforts, material reminders that facilitate immaterial feelings. They are the only things that come between you and the earth that springs back when your feet make quick love to the ground. Did you think like this before? Abandon your Prozac. Embrace your endorphins.

Forget about the “other” sports. Any activities that require a stick or a ball or a some kind of net where the stick or the ball have to move through is beyond the scope of your consideration. Besides, after awhile your legs will not move laterally and you will not jump like any ethnic group. You will become...linear.

Start to accumulate great quantities of nutritional supplements, especially powdered electrolyte replacement drinks that you will never use but look good in your ever-shrinking pantry. You may consume these from time to time but only as you mix a post-run beverage with a fellow runner. As you'd stir up a scotch and soda for a client or toss a beer to the guy who helped you fix your TV, you mix up some water and ice and (insert current popular drink here) for your running partners. The right drug for the right illness.

Give up normal relationships, whatever that means. You'll meet him or her after work at the grassy field where the run begins or the new high school track or in a chat room where oxygen uptake analysis is deconstructed. He/she will be impressed as you explain the intersections of stride length, VO2 max and gait synergy. You hold off on your theories of spandex rebound and correlating mid-sole composition. People need to earn that level of discourse. It's not that you're holding out for *Mr. or Mrs. Right* but honestly, would you *really* be happy with someone who took three, maybe four times to qualify for the Boston Marathon?

There was that one. He/she had medaled in the 30-34 age group at the Holker's Chicken 5k Walk. They had nearly escaped your eye and would've had not the freezing rain and the closing dark chased the both of you into Ray's Running Lounge. There were pictures on the wall of Pre and Kip Keino and Shorter with that sweeping mustache. Both of you had felt the urge, had agreed how sexy Joan Benoit had looked at the '84 Olympics with all those micro-tears in her singlet.

But alas, there was that fartlek run to do in the morning. And you'd gone home alone and mixed yourself a glass of powered (insert current popular drink here) with just a splash of amaretto. But your times in the morning were...encouraging.

Call him/her to ask if they'd like to join you for Thursday hill-repeats and maybe you could get some California cuisine afterwards. Just 6-8 times 90 second effort @ 85% of max and then some wood-fired pizza with one glass of chardonnay since Friday was a recovery day.

But by the third repeat you know it just won't work out. He/she is spying on your breathing patterns from behind their Oakleys, primordially searching for a chink in your sweat, a way to make you hurt without hurting you. By the sixth repeat you were eyeing each other like junkyard dogs. And when he/she suggested an easy 5k warm down you said you're saving it for the 15k trail race on Saturday? Is he/she planning on running it? There is only 2200 feet of elevation change. Basic flat and fast stuff.

Drink that chardonnay all by yourself and swear that you'll only date ultra distance runners.

Begin to consider a career change, something that allows you to prop your feet up on the desk to facilitate quicker recovery from tough morning runs. Tell a co-worker that you're considering a position at another agency. You'll make less money but they have a more relaxed dress code. The conversation goes like this:

- You're thinking of leaving this place just so you can wear Birkenstocks to work?*
- Well, I'd have a lot more flexibility?
- What, do they offer yoga classes at lunch or something?*
- Something like that.
- Why don't you just join a health club?*
- People like me don't do spin classes and Pilates.

-But you run all the time.

-Look, I don't bring up *your* religious rituals.

Enter your first marathon. Consider it the gatekeeper, the only way into the kingdom of running. Alternate between worry and over-confidence. Wonder if you'll finish. Hope that you'll win your age-group. Read Jeff Galloway's book. Up your mileage. Read Alberto Salazar's book. Decrease your mileage. Look at Bill Rogers' website. Wish you weighed 135 pounds and had near-perfect biomechanics. Consider moving to the Rift Valley to train. Is that too much? Well, at least Boulder, Colorado or Albuquerque, New Mexico. How about one of those oxygen tents that will simulate Everest base camp?

Make a list of all the things you need to be doing in preparation.

-Run long

-Buy new running shorts (lt. blue)

-Wish you were Kenyan

-Run longer

When the day arrives you wake up early—4:20 A.M. Feel butterflies in your stomach for first time since high school graduation (not counting karaoke night) when you were chosen to give a speech on “All that you've learned not to do.” Wish that you could chain the butterflies to the walls of your stomach. Repeat your mantra while you drive to the starting line: I have learned never to quit. I have learned never to quit.

Finish the marathon easily but keep running right past the other runners in the finisher's shoot, right past the volunteers taking bar coded-tags off numbers and all the way to your car before you are awoken from your trance by some boy scout telling you that you're off course. The only people who believe the story are the guys on the couch at the running store. Start moonlighting weekends at the store.

Take a vacation to Eugene, Oregon. Run Pre's Trail and leave a six-pack of micro-brew at his gravesite. Read a book about Terry Fox and his Marathon of Hope across Canada. Find yourself crying and resist the urge to nab a quick five miles before midnight.

Dream about silver belt buckles from the Western States 100.

What is it about something so primal, so essential that moves people to do things not even their mothers and spouses and dogs think they are capable of?

Suffer your first R.B.I.--a real bad injury. It's patella tendonitis. Have a nightmare about playing golf and club sports. When you awaken, you are drenched in sweat and comfort yourself with your running magazines and a fresh finisher's t-shirt. Go online and order three pair of new shoes. Two of them have the new “stability control system.” The others are racing flats. You will not be denied.

Reduce your mileage while the injury heals. It heals too slowly. Take anti-inflammatory meds. Return to a regular schedule. Experience a relapse. Go to counseling. Take anti-depressant meds. Who is making you suffer so? What is so bad about running that they would deny you this simple pleasure? Try a new orthopedist, acupuncture, Rolfing, glucosamine chondroitine and Buddhism. By the fifth week of low miles, resort to cycling and something called gymnotronics. Do your power walking under the cover of dark.

On the day that you run a snappy pain-free ten-miler, go to church and light one of those little blue prayer candles. Run across the fairway of the local golf club and pretend that you are Kenyan and cannot understand the security guard's warnings. You can do no wrong. You are healthy.

Qualify for Boston. Ask for free shoes. Get a little tattoo on you left ankle that says, *Sub 40*.

Something has shifted inside you, like tectonic plates. Running and pain are not used in the same quadrant of your brain. Difficult track workouts are only temporarily uncomfortable, a dull ache that wears off like Novocain. And what is left is the work you have done which will rebuild itself into something, someone quicker, stronger.

Read Thaddeus Kostrubala's *The Joy of Running* and George Sheehan's *Running and Being*. Then read them again.

Your sister comes to visit and says, "Look at you. Your body screams, 'Feed me!'" You want to bring her in slowly, carefully, then hook her. Feel like an athletic pusher, a running evangelist, Johnny-jogging-Appleseed. Make small comments about her weight. Introduce her to Skip and the boys. If you want to catch big bait then you have to use big bait. Buy her some lightweight trainers and a one-size-too-small jog bra. Be patient. Let her run with the hook in her mouth for awhile before setting it with a snap and a fresh finisher's t-shirt. She will look perplexed after her first one mile run around the track. She'll say that wasn't so bad, that she could probably go one more lap. Don't let her. Keep her hungry, wanting. Take her out for California Cuisine and cheap chardonnay and drop the idea of you and her doing a 5k together. For charity, of course. Nobody said these kinds of jihads would be easy.

You've become a runner; hopelessly, madly and unconditionally in love with and addicted to an activity that was formerly reserved for kids and bank robbers. You will run until your knees and hips and back won't allow you. After that you don't know what you will do. God forbid it will be golf.

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(This essay was originally published in *Peak Running Performance News*)