

RUNNING PHILOSOPHY

Running as Rebellion and Refrain

by Scott Tinley

If you've been a runner for at least five years, then you remember the feelings of physical freedom and self confidence achieved in your first 5k. If you've been running for ten years or more, you may remember the days before big city marathons had become theme-oriented circuses offering enough side bar entertainment to keep you sufficiently distracted. You might even remember neon shorts. And if you've been running for twenty years or more, you will remember seminal changes to the sport's participation rates, iconic heroes like Alberto Salazar, Boston Billy Rogers and Greta Waitz. You might even know the dates and times of their break-through performances; performances that altered the way runners think about running.

As we take on the life of an athlete, the meaning derived from our activity will change as life unfolds. Our memories are a significant part in the creation of that meaning.

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running enthusiasts, regardless of tenure, who stake some personal or professional claim on the simple yet complex act of putting one foot in front of each other, is the way they simultaneously identify with running as both an act of rebellion and refrain. For those who see themselves somewhere on the jogger/elite winner continuum, there is a common thread – they run to be different and they run to be the same.

But how can a fifteen mile-per-week plodder relate his or her involvement in running with an act of defiance? They're just doing what feels good, what keeps the heart from getting lazy and the waistline number below their age. Che Guevara was rebellious, Castro, Mao, any number of leftist political leaders may come to mind when we think about marching against the status quo. Running has a calming effect on our lives, we think; nobody protests a Sunday morning run with a few pals.

But consider the fact that running, at its physiological root, is both primal and explorative, innate and epistemological. I can remember running during the early 1970s (before Frank Shorter's Olympic marathon gold in Munich) and having cars stop and ask if I was in trouble. It just felt right to run. Not everyone had experienced that *feeling*, though. I didn't consider the act of running

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abnormal, even if social norms of athleticism had not yet heard the tribal drums that spoke the coming of change.

If you consider that the basis for any act of rebellion, however large or small, has its roots in discontent, then maybe we run to resist something other than the advancement of age. Maybe you began running because you weren't content with your health, your physical fitness, your identity as an athlete or a person. Running made you different, altered your mood chemically, naturally, offered you an outlet for your obsessive tendencies. Your Uncle Larry, the bass fisherman from Sheboygan, he couldn't run. Bad knees, never saw the point in it. And at first you didn't either. But as that point became sharper and penetrated your being, layer by layer, you looked at the world differently. It didn't matter if you were rebelling against the horror of the *next size up*, living six feet under or something Freudian that tilted your axis when you were four feet tall — you were exorcising your discontent with the past, the present and striking pre-emptively at the future. Somehow, you had earned the right (or the curse) to brand yourself a rebel. Heck, at least you were no longer *normal*.

Now, some of your reification may have been fueled by exterior sources. You loved your parents but didn't want to *become* them.

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Your family and friends weren’t giving you the attention that rebellious types get (think, Robert Redford in *The Horse Whisperer* not Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*). And athletic companies like Nike reinforced the theme. By their actions and words they told runners that it’s okay to do it their own way. Nike sponsored impenitent athletes like Steve Prefontaine, John McEnroe, and Charles Barkley, athletes who thought and played outside the lines.

Given the power of that image-laden media, backed by proven advances in equipment, Nike and its stable gave permission to a league of athletes to run during their lunch hour, skip the shower and take in a cucumber sandwich during the afternoon staff meeting. Who cares what the boss said? The product, sometimes stimulated by a snappy six miler instead of a mayo on rye and a beer, fell right to the bottom line. Suddenly corporate fitness was all the rage. Companies like outdoor gear manufacturer, Patagonia, that had always fostered atypical corporate culture grew wildly successful in part because, as its founder, Yvon Chouinard told the world (and went on to title his memoir/ business strategy text), “Let my people go surfing.” Sport rebellion was now a profitable angle of attack.

But rebellion in sport is not confined to sociocultural shifts and market trends in commercial enterprise. And it’s not just metaphysical as the individual

searches for a newer, more authentic Self by changing lanes, shoes and donning a red bandana. Sport has often been the site for various forms of social revolt: Jackie Robinson and baseball’s color barrier, Muhammad Ali’s stand against the Vietnam War, Billie Jean King thumping Bobby Riggs and smashing ancient gender ideologies, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing atop the podium at the ’68 Mexico City Olympics. The images - black-gloved fist held high, heads bowed to signify years of racial oppression, bare feet - all signify events that utilized sport as a platform to showcase social inequities and changing mores.

In some ways, runners of all distances have led the way in standing up for human rights. From the martyred Prefontaine unearthing the sham of American track and field’s fallacious claims of “amateurism” to Mary Decker Slaney’s feisty never-say-die attitude to Jim Ryan’s quiet reverence and respect for his spiritual beliefs, runners live with the dichotomous image of both loner and joiner. Perhaps there is no better example than Tom Hanks’ character in *Forest Gump*. He runs for himself, for no particular reason, but he is also connected on some plane to every other runner who does exactly the same thing. We don’t fit the mold of power and performance sports. But through running we are making our own personal statement, claiming our independence alongside others who feel and act the same way.

Not every person who studies or

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knows the multi-paradigmatic world of rebellion agrees. The esteemed left-winged critic, Noam Chomsky, noted in his seminal work, *Manufacturing Consent*, “Sports keep people from worrying about things that matter to their lives that they might have some idea of doing something about.” Quite likely, Chomsky was referring to the viewing of commercial sport as opposed to actual participation. We must constantly remind ourselves that professional sport is little more than entertainment where the ending is unknown. It is owned, formed and managed by the power elite who maintain the status quo of America as a perceived pure meritocracy. Major league team owners are not so concerned about worker’s rights until the worker/players resist and demand what they feel is fair compensation.

And if we are fans as well as participants, we have choices about how we might support or resist the state of commercial sport. Most endurance athletes that I know are more intrigued than fanatic about mainstream pro sports. Runners, for the most part, are doers not watchers. And sometimes we do things in large groups.

The nineteenth century political theorist, Karl Marx, a major proponent of worker’s rights, might be able to re-phrase his claim and substitute sports for religion as the new “opiate for the masses.” But still, we must keep the context

clear. Even for the individual runner who may work as a commodities trader trying to lower his or her blood pressure through running, the activity serves their “god of obsession” in addendum to, not because its pacifying effect. They are resisting high cholesterol, not high taxes.

In that respect, running becomes the refrain, the daily bread of respite from the grind of “getting ahead.” There is too much turmoil in our lives, we tell ourselves. A nice little jog through the park files the edge off, allows us to reframe our world. Has any runner ever come back from an easy, de-toxing jog feeling worse? And it’s not only the chemical action achieved as endorphins pulse through our deeper selves. By running we are doing something primal, assimilating our knowledge by sharing the activity with every runner, man or beast, that has come before us. Other than procreation,


what physical activity is more innate, natural or compelling?

How we gain meaning from our running will change over time as our bodies slowly decompose and shifts in societal values redefine recreation and physical fitness. It was not all that long ago when women were not allowed to participate in the Boston Marathon. It took a 20-year-old, Katherine Switzer, to enter unofficially in 1967 and rebel against oppressive patriarchal ideals. But forty years later, American youth are faced with record obesity levels. The youth seem more engaged in video games than riding bikes or playing tag around the neighborhood. Sport reflects our society which in turn mirrors our athletic choices. The choices may be clear, but the choices are still ours to make.

I can’t help but wonder if we, as athletes of the world, have a certain responsibility to bare witness, to pass the word, to don our own

black glove atop the dais; we could protest things such as the elimination of school sport programs or exorbitant entry fees or the closing of public swimming pools.

We run for ourselves and from ourselves, some days finding what we are looking for, others not. At least we are in motion, looking. And when we cannot run anymore at least we know that we once did. And it shaped who we are.

How we move our feet, swift and strong or thick and steady, might well shape a lot more than that. Had Steve Prefontaine lived, who knows what running in America would be like now? No different for Martin Luther King or JFK. Hindsight is not the point. Knowing that we speak with our steps is. 

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