

The Message Of The Marathon

By Gordon Mehler

As we watch this Sunday's New York City Marathon, running 26 miles will seem beyond the realm of most of us. But the striking feature of a marathon is that virtually anybody in good health can finish one. In last year's New York City Marathon, Johann Bossmann, 87, and Bess James, 76, were among the finishers. One need not be agile or muscular to compete. In a marathon, winning lies in having made the journey, and talent takes a back seat to endurance.

Just because the marathon is a democratic sport, however, doesn't mean all kinds of people are equally represented. Coal miners, for example, rarely have the energy to put in eight miles of training on the track after eight hours on the job. Those who are desk-bound are more apt to yearn for the gritty, physical challenge the marathon provides. In fact, about three quarters of marathon entrants have finished college and nearly half have gone to graduate school.

Another characteristic of marathoners is that they tend to be Serious Types, people with a little extra starch in their personalities. There are no statistics to back this up—only a hunch that a marathon must appeal to those whose solemn faces suggest that life is more struggle than frolic. Besides, nobody runs a marathon just for fun. Apart from the months of hard training and the shin splints and knee pains, the rigors of the race itself are enough to drive even the heartiest fun-lover to the sidelines.

It's easier to figure out who runs marathons than to understand why marathons are run. And so, while podiatrists prosper, the rest of us wonder: what motivates these long-distance athletes? Is it the hope of gaining discipline and losing weight? Is it the sudden glory bestowed by a throng of curbside cheerleaders?

No doubt there are many reasons for running a marathon, including the simple pleasure of tackling a challenge and cashing in on the self-esteem that comes with it. Yet, if we take an historical view, today's marathon has a negative message in it. When Phidippides, the unwitting father of the sport, whizzed across the Plain of Marathon in 490 B.C., he carried news of the Greek victory over the Persians. Like Paul Revere, he took to the road with a concrete mission. When he arrived in Athens, he cried, "Rejoice, we conquer!" And then he dropped dead. The modern marathon suggests that our lives have gotten so soft and comfortable that we're willing to kill ourselves for the challenge alone, whether it's functional or not.

For some, even the marathon is not enough. Overachievers at the cutting edge have begun to devote themselves to triathlons and ultra-marathons. A few have gone even further. Two years ago, Yiannos Kouros of Greece ran 635 miles in six days. The year before that, England's Peter Bird rowed 9,560 miles alone across the Pacific. Where will it stop?

Physiologists probing the frontiers of physical stamina assure us that we have not yet reached the limits of what the human body can endure. But even if we had reached those limits, at some point, all this self-conscious exertion becomes excessive and overdone. Like workaholics whose career-mongering forces them to push everything else out of their lives, Mr. Bird and Mr. Kouros are reminiscent of Captain Ahab in pursuit of the white whale—monomaniacal, obsessive, unable to muster the resolve to quit.



Of course, most of us face the opposite problem: not too much endurance but too little. We wish we didn't give up quite as often or quite as easily as we do, and we admire those who don't. Surely, endurance, in the best sense, is the central theme of the marathon, and no essay on why people run marathons would be complete without it.

Endurance is a quality we admire in numerous guises, from the boxer who goes the distance in the ring to the scientist who plods on in the lab. It is also a quality we fall back on when times are rough. Recall, for example, the various hostage crises of the past year. Newscasters routinely sprinkled their reports with various terms of endurance. They spoke about how the hostages were "holding up well," that they had "staying power" and were "hanging in there."

Those of us who followed the last Summer Olympics probably remember that vivid image of endurance in the Swiss runner, Gabrielle Andersen-Schiess, as she labored through the final lap of the first woman's marathon. Her body was bent, wobbly and close to collapse, but her mind refused to surrender. Groggy with pain and fatigue, she trudged on, carrying her resolution like a wounded soldier. Finally, she staggered across the finish line, and the crowd roared. Her performance brought out the throat lumps

and goosebumps. By squeezing out those few extra ounces of needed effort, she ignited a spirit of never-say-die—the kind of spirit that makes movies like "Rocky" and "Chariots of Fire" perpetually popular.

Outside the world of sports and movies, however, the drama of endurance is often invisible. There are those with projects and problems who persevere heroically over the course of a lifetime. And they do so without much fanfare or reinforcement. Because their endurance is never overtly demonstrated, we rarely applaud them, let alone hand off a cup of water and a wet sponge as they push on to the next mile-marker.

The marathon places endurance on public display. By celebrating the event, we celebrate the quality its participants embody. As we watch or join those marathon runners—streaked white with salty perspiration, putting one foot in front of the other, we forgive their obsessiveness. They inspire us, and they help us come away feeling that, despite the difficulties in our own lives, we just might pull through.

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