The Running Life: We Happy Few

If it were easy, everyone would do it

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Unlike the myriad bad dates or unfortunate haircuts I have been party to in my life, I have never once gone out for a run and returned saying: "I wish I hadn't done that." No matter the weather, my own physical or psychic maladies, external problems or inner turmoil, running is invariably the right thing to do, even under the most trying circumstances. Many days, getting dressed and out the door is the most daunting part of the process. Especially in the sub-freezing Maine winters, the prospect of heading out in the pre-dawn darkness can be a real physical as well as psychological challenge. Forget hill repeats, LSD, or tempo runs; the true test is often just showing up.

The simple act of starting seems to be the deal-breaker for many runner wannabes. Sure, going out at noon on a crisp fall day, knocking off a few quick miles at a leisurely pace is easy; any monkey can do that. But becoming a runner and staying a runner, year in and year out, through ennui and injury, time pressures and relationship constraints, that, as each of us has learned, is really, really hard. To those on the outside looking in, this kind of commitment can seem to be bordering on the impossible.

For a true runner the difficulty lies not in the running but in the contemplation of not running. Granted, for some of us taking a day or two off is a delicious luxury, like playing hooky or turning off the alarm and going back to sleep. But more time off than that and we start to get cranky and out-of-sorts. Other more dedicated (or more compulsive) runners have streaks that are inviolate. For them the thought of days or weeks off is anathema.

I have this theory about runners that seems to prove itself repeatedly, no matter where I travel. My contention is that, in addition to the obvious physical and mental benefits imparted by this thing that we do, an unacknowledged but significant part of the lure of running is that it's not for most people. Runners self-select and are reduced to a fairly small percentage of the population. I firmly believe that it is precisely because everyone isn't doing it that we embrace the endeavor so enthusiastically.

I liken being a runner to living in Maine. For my purposes, life in my northern New England town is close to perfection. It has extraordinary physical beauty, 3,478 miles of coastline, and summer days to make a poet's heart sing. Native Mainers are people of impressive variety and sophistication. They manage to strike an admirable balance between warmth and restraint; they are kind, patient and helpful without being overly effusive or fulsome.

Maine is the perfect place to live — except for eight months of the year. An old joke explains that Maine has two seasons, winter and the Fourth of July. That is only slightly hyperbolic. Winter in Maine lasts a very long time and then slides right into summer, with little or no discernible spring to impede its progress. The days are cold and short and the nights are colder and longer. Winter in Maine is for the intrepid; the ones who hate it usually move. Of the people who remain, some tolerate the extremes while dreaming of summertime or tropical vacations and umbrella drinks on the beach. Then there are people like me; people who actually like the frigid temperatures and the darkness and mud season. All these Maine elements have their charms, but for those few who admire them, we also secretly revel in the fact that these conditions are the most effective way to weed out the sissies. Maine's adversity makes those who remain stronger while culling the population. If it were easy, everyone would live here. Instead we have a population that is a little more than a million hardy souls.

This is not, I believe, unlike running. There are those who run for fun or fitness. There are the experience junkies who accumulate events for their personal history like charms on a bracelet, skydiving — check, ski the Alps — check, run a marathon — check. For a passionate runner, fitness is important but it's not the goal. It's not enough to know that you can complete a 10K or a marathon or a 100 miler; running is the framework that supports the rest of your life, and the races are a small part of the whole.

I still have most of the bib numbers from the races I've run in the last 18 years. They are dumped unceremoniously into a trunk in my bedroom where they stay, for the most part, out of sight and out of mind. But every once in a while, I haul them out and, one by one, I recall not only the race itself, but the days and months leading up to it. I think about the training and the people who trained with me, about what my life looked like during that period, and I think about the cumulative effect these races and years of running have had on my personal history. The handful of trophies I have collected over the years are a source of real joy because they represent an accumulation of work, focus and effort, not for a race but for the weeks and months leading up to it. They evoke both a sense of past achievement and future potential.

We belong to an exclusive club where running defines who we are and how we relate to the world. As true runners we know that what we do is not a one-time thing. It's not enough to collect the experience; you must keep doing it when you are getting better, stronger, and faster. But even more important, you must keep running when you are bored or injured or feeling old and worn out. You must persevere when you are running not on talent but on character, when you are living the running life.

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1 of 1 6/1/09 11:09 AM