

Runners on RUNNING

The Best Nonfiction
of Distance Running

Unforgettable stories by

Kenny Moore

Don Kardong

Kathrine Switzer

Hal Higdon

Amby Burfoot

Marc Bloom

and more

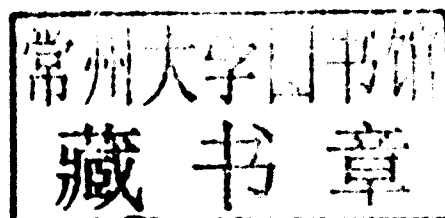


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Editor

Runners on ***RUNNING***

The Best Nonfiction of Distance Running



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EDITOR



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For Aileen

acknowledgments

I'd like to express my gratitude to the supporting cast who helped make this book a reality.

I'm indebted to three authors whose guides to the literature of running were indispensable resources during the course of my project. Their books pointed me in the right direction and helped me find pearls in an ocean of literature. These books were Bob Wischnia and Marty Post's *Running: A Guide to the Literature* (Garland, 1983) and Roger Robinson's *Running in Literature: A Guide for Scholars, Readers, Runners, and Dreamers* (Breakaway Books, 2003).

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I also must give a shout-out to a group that has had a big influence—those with whom I've shared many a mile and many a race, my former teammates, coaches, and runners. This fraternity of kindred spirits is a big part of what makes this sport great.

And finally, no words can truly express my thanks to my wife, Aileen, and my children, Matt, Abby, and Anna. No book gets created without the sacrifices of the author's loved ones. My family's unwavering support and love sustained me through many an hour away from them. To you, I can only say, I love you.

introduction

I trace the real origins of this book to a small country many miles from my home where, in my boyhood imagination, a determined group of running buddies, dressed in black singlets, push themselves up the hills of the Waiatarua, their infamous training ground, and turn themselves into world-beaters.

My imaginings came from a book I was reading. I had gone out for high school cross country, the only sport worthy of my scrawniness. Early in the season, after some particularly long and painful run, my coach handed me a book.

“Required reading,” he said.

The book was titled *A Clean Pair of Heels*. It was the autobiography of Murray Halberg, one of New Zealand’s greatest distance runners. Halberg was an unlikely champion, his left arm severely disabled as the result of a rugby injury. Yet he rose to the highest pinnacle of his sport, winning the 5,000 meters in the Rome Olympics. Halberg’s heroic story was irresistible.

So I eagerly tore into the next book from my coach, which was *No Bugles, No Drums*, the autobiography of Peter Snell, Halberg’s teammate. Snell had the power of a linebacker and the ability to destroy a field with his kick. Snell won both the 800- and 1,500-meter races in the Tokyo Olympics; he remains the only runner ever to pull off this double.

Fifty years ago the runners from Down Under ruled the distance world. Their autobiographies were nourishment for a young runner’s soul. I was swept up in the New Zealand running world. I learned the exotic names of their legendary training runs. I could quote their personal records. I studied their workouts for secrets. I soaked up the ideas of their guru Arthur Lydiard. I searched in vain for a black singlet with a fern leaf on it.

My teammates read those books, too. We pictured ourselves as smaller, skinnier versions of the great Kiwi runners. The word *geek* hadn’t been invented yet. To the rest of our schoolmates, we were simply weirdos, and we reveled in our weirdness. We relished the fact that others couldn’t see what we all knew: That we had the coolest sport, the most equal-opportunity sport, the one that most directly rewarded hard work and tenacity.

Later my reading interests turned to American literature with the publication of *The Jim Ryun Story*. Another great book! Here is Ryun, a gawky high school freshman, initially an average runner on his team. Then an amazing metamorphosis—two years go by, and in his junior year he breaks the four-minute mile and makes the Olympic team. And the next year he beats the world-record holder, the great Snell! It was unbelievable, and it was true.

And if *he* could do it—that gawky, skinny high-schooler—*why not me?*

Well, why not? I logged my miles. I ran up sand dunes. I did my speed work. And I imagined.

The spring of my senior year found me, the scrawny daydreamer, toeing the line in a 5,000-meter international race in the Los Angeles Coliseum. The race promoter liked to include an up-and-coming high school runner, and that year

it was me. The field was loaded. Way down the starting line in lane 1 stood one of my greatest heroes, Ron Clarke, the holder of 17 world records.

On a perfect California evening, the gun went off, and Clarke, adhering to his code, set a brutal pace and never looked back. All the rest of us were splayed around the track, racing for second. I hung on for dear life, ended up beating a few people, and accomplished my goal of not getting lapped by Clarke. I ran my heart out.

I had my 15 minutes of fame. I didn't dream it, it really happened. And I came to understand a truth about running.

What makes a distance runner tick? Sure, hard work is necessary. Mileage, interval work, hills, good nutrition—they're each important. But there's one thing that trumps them all. It is *imagination* that fuels the distance runner.

True stories are powerful things for athletes. That's the impetus for this book. My aim was to bring together the best true stories about running, the best writing about runners and races. My hope is that the pieces in this collection will entertain you, provoke you, fire your imagination, and inspire your running, as they have for me.

I envisioned a collection that showcases the poets and philosophers of our sport as well as the legendary battles and heroes. I envisioned a collection that would reflect on the timeless aspects of our sport, stories that would encompass the running experience and would go below the surface to offer insights.

Recently, I went to an art exhibit that featured many of the famous impressionist paintings. Seeing the Monets and Manets and Renoirs all together in one place, seeing the various subjects and styles, I came away with a richer understanding of impressionism. My hope is that *Runners on Running* will have a similar effect: that you'll come away feeling that *this* is what distance running is all about.

To that end, I searched for feature articles, book excerpts, and essays that explore the spirit and heart of the runner and the racer. I favored those that got at the perennial questions. What is it about running that elicits so much joy? What anxieties prey on the racer? What role do mentors play in creating miracles? What bonds are forged by running mates and by competitors? Which heroes belong in our pantheon?

But there's an ocean of good nonfiction about distance running, so how does one begin to choose? I began by setting a few boundaries. The boundaries were arbitrary in a way but necessary to keeping me, as the editor, afloat in a wide sea. Here is what this collection does *not* include:

- There are no instructional articles, although I have fond memories of the first running book I ever owned, Fred Wilt's *Run Run Run*, a collection of articles about training. Since that 1964 book, the how-to of running has been a very well-traveled road, and you can easily find bookshelves of good advice.

- There are no columns. While column writing is an important part of running literature, I chose the longer form for this collection. It makes for a more satisfying meal.
- I steered away from news reports. I like reading race results as much as anyone, but my aim here is writing that has more endurance.
- Finally, I should confess to a preference for the competitive runner. We all start as joggers and we all finish as joggers, but to me, the drama and the loveliness of running are greatest when we are competitors.

Running is blessed with some truly world-class writers. What is it about our sport that produces such wonderful writing? It's no coincidence that most of these writers are runners themselves. If their descriptions are amazingly right on, if their stories nail certain verities about running, it is for this reason: These writers have been there. They've experienced the loneliness of a long run when there are miles to go and the rain has started. They know what it feels like to sprint at the end of a tough race. They understand the injured runner's dark night of the soul. For these writers, their subject is personal.

If their writing epitomizes clear thinking, perhaps it is due in no small measure to all those solitary miles on the road. What else is there to do but think? The runner's body gets honed, and so does his thinking.

If their writing shows a mastery of the craft, perhaps it's because the requirements for great writing are the same as those for great running—discipline, patience, hard work, devotion. Therefore, this anthology celebrates the writers as well as the literature of running. Kenny Moore, Amby Burfoot, Kathrine Switzer, Bernd Heinrich, and the rest of my field—these are writers who know what they are talking about. And as a wonderful bonus, they can really write.

When searching for the best of the best, the anthologist may, as a goal, seek to be objective in his choosing, to adhere to a certain logic and balance, and to disallow personal bias. But ultimately, that is impossible. Every reader, the anthologist included, responds to and judges a reading based on his own experiences.

As I look over the selections that made my finals, I can easily see my biases reflected in the subjects. Stories about two of my old heroes, Murray Halberg and Ron Clarke, made the list, their courage still irresistible to me. In another story, my Kansas teammate Jim Ryun battles his nemesis Marty Liquori in the "Dream Mile," a race I've never forgotten. A story about Pre, my contemporary, also made the finals—he's still exerting his presence after all these years, standing there glaring, cocky as ever. And yes, one of my own stories is in this collection, waiting self-consciously among the other entrants, hoping not to be too outclassed.

So in other words, this is a personal collection. I hope you will like it.

For a simple sport, distance running is rich and deeply layered. If you linger for awhile with these storytellers, you will see running's exquisite strands, and you will come to understand its DNA.

And as you read, I encourage you to imagine. Imagine yourself as the runner you dream to be. See yourself racing through your own Waiatarua loop, drafting along with the greats. Then put this book down and go out for a good hard run.



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spirit

So each day I take to the roads as a
beginner, a child, a poet. . . .

There is the theater where we can
write and act out our own dreams.

~George Sheehan, masters runner and author

Running

George Sheehan, 1978

Runner, doctor, philosopher, poet—this unique combination of talents gave rise to the phenomenon of George Sheehan. No one has been better at giving voice to the ineffable joys and personal discoveries of runners. His essays helped make it OK to go nuts over distance running. “Success rests,” Sheehan said, “in having the courage and endurance and, above all, the will, to become the person you are, however peculiar that may be.”

Every mile I run is my first. Every hour on the roads a new beginning. Every day I put on my running clothes, I am born again. Seeing things as if for the first time, seeing the familiar as unfamiliar, the common as uncommon. Doing what Goethe said was the hardest thing of all, seeing with my own eyes that which is spread before me. Bringing to that running, that play, the attitude of the child, the perception of a poet. Being a beginner with a beginner’s mind, a beginner’s heart, a beginner’s body.

There is no other way to run, no other way to live. Otherwise my runs become dull, uninspired interludes. The running becomes routine, becomes part of the humdrum apathy and indifference which the poet John Hall Wheelock called a shield between us and reality. It becomes a chore, becomes habit. And habit kills awareness and separates us from ourselves.

My awareness begins with my body, my beginner’s body. Each day I discover how to breathe. Taste the air. Feel it move through my lungs. I learn to exhale totally and groan and grunt, marking my passage through the fields and trees like some animal.

Each day I search out how to run. Feeling the thrust of the hamstrings. Letting the foot drop below the knee. Arriving at the form the child adopts naturally. The body, a little stronger perhaps, certainly more durable, must come upon these ideas as fresh as if newly thought. And then concentrate on this beginning and bring to it the beginner’s joy in doing this tremendously simple yet tremendously complex thing so well.

From then on it becomes more and more difficult. It is relatively easy to return to basics with the body. But to have a beginner’s heart and mind is a different matter. To take sight and smell, hearing and touch and become a new Adam in a new Eden is tough going even for a poet. Even for those who live more and participate more in their own existence. And yet like them I must listen and discover forgotten knowledge. Must respond to everything around me and inside me as well.

From George Sheehan, 1978, *Running and Being: The Total Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster). Reprinted by permission of the George Sheehan Trust.

Poets do this naturally. A really good poet, wrote James Dickey, is like an engine with the governor off. And it's no good for people to say that life should not mean that much to a poet. The really good poet, said Dickey, has no choice; that's the way he is.

The best most of us can do is to be a poet an hour a day. Take the hour when we run or tennis or golf or garden; take that hour away from being a serious adult and become serious beginners. Take an hour away from what Shelley called a life of error, ignorance and strife, and introduce love and beauty and delight.

Those good things began in my beginning. When I was not afraid to respond to my feeling. Before I was taught not to cry. Before I learned that humor had a time and a place and deep emotions had best be concealed, that passion be left unfelt.

When I run I go back to those better days. Now no emotion is foreign to me. I express myself totally. My body and heart and mind interact and open me to the infinite possibilities only a beginner can envision. And I relive that moment in the beginning of things when, as Yeats said, we understand more perfectly than we understand until all is finished.

And what of that finish? "It is development, improvement and completion that means the deterioration of the creativeness," wrote Berdyaev, the Russian theologian, "the cooling down of the creative fire, decay, old age."

I will have none of that. So each day I take to the roads as a beginner, a child, a poet. Seeking the innocence of the beginner, the wonder of the child and the vision of the poet. Hoping for a new appreciation of the landscape, a new perspective of my inner world, some new insights on life, a new response to existence and myself.

There are times, more often than the good times, when I fail. I never do pierce the shield. I return with a shopping list of things to do tomorrow. The miraculous has gone unseen. The message has gone unheard. I have had one of those loveless days on a lovely day for love.

Still, there is always the chance I'll have beginner's luck. And this run, this hour, this day, may begin in delight and end in wisdom.



I am a noonday runner. In the past, and still from time to time, I have run in the morning or evening. But almost always these days, I run in the early afternoon.

You might think this choice of when to run simply a matter of convenience. Of fitting it in when time becomes available. Most people believe that running is running, regardless of when it is done. But I know this is not so. There is a time, as Ecclesiastes wrote, for every purpose under heaven. There is a time

for running. Mine is midday. I run at midday because I must. I run at midday because my body and soul tell me to.

My body is at its best in early afternoon. My circulation rhythms at their crest. Like the sun, my energy is at its zenith, my fields of force at maximum. Whatever I do, I do best at this time of day.

But midday has more than physiological importance. When I run at noon, I run at the sixth hour. I run at an hour that has significance that goes back through the history of the race. An hour that reminds me I am participating in an ever-recurring mystery, seeking and making a self I will never fully know. An hour that brings me back to myth and ritual and a feeling for the holy.

In the sixth hour, I am in a time that is recurrent and symbolic. A time that Eliade wrote of as circular, reversible and recoverable. A time that tells me I am a child of the universe born for more than is visible in this world.

Daybreak and sunset have similar implications. The morning run speaks for rebirth and the new life. Just as morning prayers praise the Lord, sing the earth, tell of renewed purpose. And the evening run is for those who have fought the good fight and now desire only the peace an hour's run at a slow, steady pace will give them. When I run in these closing stages of the day, I am a philosopher. I accept life, death, the self, what I have done. I am content.

From this perspective, the morning run is my youth. Running in the morning is to wear the bright morning face. It is for health and fitness and making the team. It is accepting discipline, obeying duty and acquiring self-control.

Midday is adult. The run is in pursuit of goals, the making of the self, the looking for something to leave behind. You must say it is in the Catholic tradition, linking goodness to beauty and proportion and achievement.

If so, the evening run is toward the East, toward that ancient acceptance of things as they are. That mature wisdom with which we see a world that has order and sense. And we know, as Erikson said, that our one and only life cycle was something that had to be and, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions.

One thing we runners know. There is no substitute for running. No matter what age we are. No matter what time we do it.

My fight is not with age. Running has won that battle for me. Running is my fountain of youth, my elixir of life. It will keep me young forever. When I run, I know there is no need to grow old. I know that my running, my play, will conquer time.

And there on the roads, I can pursue my perfection for the rest of my days, and finally, as his wife said of Kazantzakis dead at seventy-four, be mowed down in the first flower of my youth.

The fight, then, is never with age; it is with boredom, with routine, with the danger of not living at all. Then life will stop, growth will cease, learning will come to an end. You no longer become who you are. You begin to kill time or live it without thought or purpose. Everything that is happiness, all that is excitement, whatever you know of joy and delight, will evaporate. Life will

be reduced to a slow progression of days and weeks and months. Time will become an enemy instead of an ally.

When I run, I avoid all this. I enter a world where time stops, where now is a fair sample of eternity. Where I am filled with excitement and joy and delight, even with the intensity and inner fire and never-ending search for self of a Kazantzakis. I enter a state that will be man's most congenial environment.

"Play, games, jests, culture, we affirm," wrote Plato, "are the most serious things in life." And for the most serious of all reasons, what Kierkegaard called "choosing one's self." Or, to use Plato's thought again, to recapture our original state of perfection.

But isn't that perfection, or at least the bodily part of it, only resident in youth? Not if you persist in your sport, persevere in your play. True, we delight in our bodies in our youth and envy the young as we grow old. But this need not be.

We can continue to keep our bodies in beauty and competence until death claims us. We should know that the fit die young in body as well as in mind and heart. That, like Kazantzakis, whatever their age they will be mowed down in the first flower of their youth.

Running has made me young again. I run now as I did at twenty. I have the same health, the same vigor, the same sensations of power and grace. And I have the strength and speed and endurance of those years younger than me. Not because I am exceptional, but because I do what I do with my whole self. My running is an incitement to energy. It is an outpouring from the very center of my being. It is a vital force that takes me to the peak of my powers and there opens me to myself and to the world and to others.

Running gives me a body and mind and heart willing to follow my own vision, to break the mold, to choose a new course, even perhaps to become the hero that Ortega said we all carry within us. This is a lifelong task. A lifelong of saying, as did Ortega, "That's not it, that's not it." And therefore a life that must be very young and eager and full of enthusiasm, full of sport and play, full of running.

If you would not age, you must make everything you do touched with play, play of the body, of thought, of emotions. If you do, you will belong to that special class of people who find joy and happiness in every act, in every moment. Those to whom leisure is the one thing valuable. Those whom Ruskin called "the proudly idle."

My running and your play may be idleness to those of another mind. But it is the self-awareness, the consciousness, the intensity, that is important, however inconsequential the activity. "Come into the kitchen," said Heraclitus. "The gods are there, too." And out on the roads, and whenever you play, there is fitness and self-discovery and the persons we were destined to be. There is the theater where we can write and act out our own dreams. Having first, of course, gotten down to bone and muscle, and then come to some understanding of the unique once-in-an-eternity person each one of us is.

Running reminds me that any age man is still the marvel of creation. With the passage of time, there is little deterioration of our physical or psychic powers,