

# The Running Life: Can't We All Just Get Along

## Promoting a Culture of Respect Among Runners

By Candace Karu

As featured in the Jan/Feb 2006 issue of Running Times Magazine

**Is it just me or is the population of cranky runners getting bigger these days?** I ask this question because it seems that lately, wherever I turn, there's a snarky comment, an irritable web posting, or a condescending column directed toward seemingly innocent groups of runners.

My unease began several years ago, when I started to hear people grouching about charity runners. This group of reasonably altruistic, freshly minted runners seems to create controversy and raise ire whenever they turn up at a race. To the uninitiated this might be difficult to fathom. How could anyone scorn a cohort of well-intentioned participants doing good works and bringing much-needed media attention to a relatively obscure sport? What would the logic be of not welcoming them into the world of running? From what I have observed, some runners, a significant number of them from the front of the pack, believe that charity runners are simply experience junkies, eager to tick "complete a marathon" off their lifelong to-do list. They complain that charity runners are running for all the wrong reasons: Because they are not taking up the sport for a lifetime of fitness, ongoing physical improvement, and the joy of competition, charity runners' participation in these races must be less valid than their non-charity counterparts.

In the September 2003 issue of Running Times, Jonathan Beverly and Roger Robinson wrote about this debate in their article, "The Greatest of These Is Charity." They explored the origins, implications, and the future of charity running. The article generated more mail than any piece previously printed in this magazine. It soon became clear that the trend of racing to raise money upset some of our readers.

At about that same time, I started to explore online running forums and chat rooms. The conversations in these cyber-communities are, for the most part, about training, racing, nutrition, elite stargazing, and running gossip. On each of the various running websites there are regulars, some who seem to have way too much time on their hands, weighing in on virtually any subject, often with alarming vitriol. I soon discovered that occasionally the threads turn ugly. There are postings ridiculing all kinds of back-of-the-pack runners. There are threads that turn into misogynistic rants. And there are ongoing complaints about the deterioration of running in the United States and the back-of-the-pack runners contributing to the problem. A column in the November 2005 issue of this magazine made me think about the diversity of runners in our own Running Times family. Senior Writer Mike Tymn, whose work as a writer and stature as a talented and devoted runner I have long admired, wrote a column that drove this point home. Titled "What's Important? Having a Life vs. Running Seriously," his article decried the declining race times in his former home of Hawaii. Looking back on his days of serious competition, with its double workouts and 90-mile weeks with nostalgic yearning, Mike describes how his dedication and sacrifice allowed him to maximize his potential and enrich his life.

A running coach he talked to put forth the idea that "runners these days want to have a life." In his article, Mike contends that for many people having a life involves "busying themselves with their jobs, showing off their polished cars; escaping into fictitious stories in books, at the movies, and on television; jabbering on their cell phones; experiencing vicarious thrills at sporting events; pursuing material wealth; and seeking a mundane security." He goes on to characterize these people as Philistines, using the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's definition: "a man fully concerned with the trivial."

Mike's characterization of a "serious runner" made me realize that the way we view runners and running are wildly, perhaps irredeemably different. Are serious runners only those concerned with PRs? Is there a correlation between mileage and seriousness? While the accomplishments of elite runners are to be applauded, admired, and to some degree, emulated, runners are on the roads or trails day in and day out for a variety of reasons. Daily runs enrich my life, my mind, and my spirit. But I am also enriched by escaping into fictitious stories and great literature, jabbering with friends, and sometimes, when I'm not running, I experience vicarious thrills at sporting events; all pursuits that Mike Tymn contends keep me from a serious runner's self-actualization. I believe that not only am I not a Philistine, I am no less serious a runner than my colleague. We simply occupy dramatically different positions in the running community.

That community is a lot like a large, boisterous, slightly dysfunctional family. And like most families, there are internal struggles and personality conflicts that are the cause of minor misunderstandings and major conflicts. But when push comes to shove, families are there for each other.

As members of this incomparable family, can we at least agree that all runners should be free to pursue their own goals without being judged or belittled? People are serious about running for all kinds of reasons. Some are driven by PR's and competition. Some run for inner peace or outer beauty. For some, running creates a family of choice and a place to call home. Some runners are even serious about raising money for charity.

From the front of the pack to the back, there are dedicated runners, runners who love the sport. Each one is different. In my estimation, each one is a runner.

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