

The Running Life: He Runs, She Runs

Why We Do What We Do

By Candace Karu

As featured in the October 2004 issue of Running Times Magazine

Running Times readers are fortunate to have the informative and knowledgeable contributions of Editor Jonathan Beverly, Managing Editor Marc Chalufour, Editor at Large Jim Gerweck, and Trail Editor Adam Chase. *This embarrassment of riches is marred only by the absence of a regular feminine editorial perspective. Enter "The Running Life." My charge is not to write about women's issues, but to inform this page with a woman's point of view. My hope is that, like the contributions from my male colleagues, this column will be of interest to all our readers.*

Why not find out what motivates men and women runners?" I asked myself. I wanted to know how different we are and how we are different. Is motivation influenced by gender? In addition, I was eager to find out if the needs of women readers diverged dramatically from those of men. This was an opportunity to cast a wide cyber net and elicit thoughtful answers from a wildly diverse group of runners about a subject I find fascinating. With luck the research would also help determine future topics for this column. Anthropological snooping was clearly in order.

To this end I decided to conduct an informal, thoroughly unscientific survey. I emailed 50 or 60 of my running friends around the world. Former Olympians and back-of-the-packers, men and women, young and old, all answered these two questions. "When and why did you start running?" and "Why do you continue to run?" Because I am a scientist neither by training nor disposition, I thought I knew the answers before I asked the questions. I can be such a dope. What I learned surprised me and changed the way I think.

First, I discovered that it isn't particularly important to most people why they started running. I wasn't surprised to hear from a number of men that they came to the sport to get in shape for other athletic activities. I was however, surprised that as many women told me the same thing. Another revelation? Both men and women came to running via cross country or track, their size and inclination rendering them ill-suited to other more mainstream sports. My concept of the 90-pound weakling as a young boy was shot. Young girls (and even some of their mothers) also started running because they felt powerless and needed a way to feel strong and connected to their bodies.

Many respondents, both male and female, came to running later in life. Some were quitting cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, or bad relationships. Others were trying to get thinner, stronger, healthier. Some ran away from demons, others toward fulfillment, either psychic or physical. Some ran for love. A few ran for money.

None of these reasons seemed to make much difference. What mattered to every person who answered my questions is that running now defines who they are and what they do. Although many started in other sports or pursuits, they are no longer soccer players or equestrians or golfers or ballet dancers. They may still do these things, but today they are runners.

"Why do you continue to run?" elicited answers time and again that made it clear that running is about connections. I learned that running connects us to our own physical, emotional and spiritual selves. It can give us time to sort out both the complicated and mundane aspects of our lives or it can give us space and time to be free, to abandon care and worry in order to live truly in the moment for a short time. To my delight, as many men wrote passionate, poetic responses about these connections as women.

I learned that running connects you to your family. One person said he cherished the times he ran with his father. Another runs with her sister almost every day. Both men and women run in order to set an example of fitness and discipline for their children.

Running connects us to the rich and diverse community of runners and bestows upon even the most socially awkward of us the grace of belonging and comfort when surrounded by a group of people who accept us without question or reservation. My survey revealed that the joy of acceptance knows no gender.

I learned that running connects us to our environment by allowing us to savor each day as it comes, revealed on road and trail, hill and valley, rain or shine, with the change of each season. Running releases us from the boundaries that circumscribe our day-to-day existence. Running connects us to our most primitive selves and, literally, grounds us to the earth.

Answering two simple questions revealed no categorical differences between men and women. There was, however, an interesting divide between young and old runners. Competition, in this informal focus group, was the bailiwick of relative youth, whether in actual years or years as a runner. The thrill of PRs, hardware, and absolute achievement figured more heavily into younger runners' answers.

Several older runners expressed regret that their PRs were, for the most part, behind them. For many, their competitive urges have been internalized, producing personal victories. Most are profoundly grateful to be running and are working to accept the changing nature of their athletic abilities.

In the end, for each of us running is a gift. It allows us to be graceful and strong, independent and part of a community, connected and totally free. Each runner is different. Each runner is the same. Woman or man, we are simply runners.

Copyright © 2009 [Running Times Magazine](#) - All Rights Reserved.