

# The Running Life: The Leading Life

## My Heroes Have Always Been Runners

By Candace Karu

As featured in the June 2006 issue of Running Times Magazine

**Since its infancy the running community has manifested a culture of uncommon generosity and good will.** In the 1970s as the first running boom gained momentum, runners were mostly fast and overwhelmingly male. It was a small group where secrets were difficult to keep and a spirit of camaraderie prevailed. In spite of fierce competition and intense focus on personal achievement, these runners, by all accounts, considered themselves part of an exclusive club, one where members looked after their own.

As the sport expanded into the second boom of the 1990s, women and recreational enthusiasts of both genders swelled its ranks. I was one of many who took up running during this unprecedented period of growth. It was early in my development as a runner that I experienced the unique spirit of cooperation, compassion and caring that pervades the sport. I found that new runners were almost universally welcomed into the fold with warmth and enthusiasm. Advice sought, even from virtual strangers, was readily and cheerfully given.

During those first months as a newly minted runner, a friend invited me to volunteer and train with the Achilles Track Club, whose mission is to help people with disabilities participate in mainstream athletics. The friendships I forged remain solid to this day and my association with the club opened my eyes to the myriad ways that runners reach beyond themselves to help others.

One of the things I've always loved about running is meeting people I surely would not have met otherwise. When I became a runner, I was taken out of my smallish world filled with work and children and brought into a milieu brimming with characters, people unlike me and unlike each other in so many different ways. I met academics who ran with sanitation workers who ran with beauticians who ran with farmers who ran with househusbands. Many of these people found ways large and small to incorporate acts of heroism into their running lives.

Gilbert Tuhabonye is one of those runners. A reluctant hero at best, Gilbert was born on a small farm in the east African country of Burundi. Like many children in his Tutsi tribe, Gilbert grew up running; he ran to school, he ran to do chores and he ran for fun, often chasing his family's cows. When Gilbert was in sixth grade, his Catholic family sent him to a Protestant boarding school over 150 miles from his home. While there, Gilbert became a national champion runner with dreams of one day competing in the Olympics. The centuries-old war between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes changed his plans forever. In 1993, Hutu classmates, along with their parents and other tribesmen, forced Gilbert and over 100 of his Tutsi classmates and teachers into a room. After beating many of the Tutsis to death with machetes, they set the room on fire. Hours later, Gilbert, the lone survivor of the massacre, escaped the building, bleeding, and burned almost beyond recognition.

In spite of his horrific ordeal, Gilbert has emerged 13 years later as a nationally ranked runner, a devoted husband and father, and a beloved coach to runners of all abilities. After graduating from Abilene Christian University, Gilbert settled in Austin, TX, where he coaches the very passionate club known as Gilbert's Gazelles.

My friend Cathy Troisi is another hero on the run. Her running career began only 12 years ago at age 47, but during that time Cathy has raised thousands of dollars for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Though raising funds for the cancer community is never far from her mind, Cathy has had amazing personal running success as well, completing 176 marathons and ultras. For the last year Cathy's 31-year-old daughter Kimi has been battling advanced stage colon cancer. Putting her own life on hold, Cathy moved in to care for her daughter and two grandchildren, then 4 years and 22 months, while Kimi received an intense regimen of chemotherapy at Dana-Farber. The irony of this turnabout is not lost on the amazingly upbeat and optimistic Cathy, who goes about each day much like she goes about every marathon and ultra—one foot in front of the other and grateful for every step.

What is it about running that often inspires us to look outside of our own lives and see the need in others? I can think of scores of runners I have met over the years who do this as a matter of course. People like Olympic gold medalist Joan Benoit Samuelson, who, with persistence and grace, changed the face of women's running and who continues to promote health, fitness, and community throughout the world. Anne Audain, former New Zealand Olympian, like Joanie, advocates tirelessly for opportunities for women runners. She also helped found the Idaho Women's Fitness Celebration, one of the country's biggest women-only races, which promotes health and fitness for women of all ages and abilities.

Running means different things to each of us. For elite athletes it can be about achieving greatness, pushing beyond perceived limits, working harder and giving more than their competition. Heroic effort and heroic goals are theirs. For ordinary runners, heroism can manifest itself in less dramatic ways. After his weekend long run, my friend Ned buys a dozen donuts and takes them to the park where he shares them with members of the homeless community. Not only does he feed them, he takes the time to talk and listen. Sometimes a hero is a tall guy in running clothes with a box of donuts and an open heart.

Copyright © 2009 [Running Times Magazine](http://runningtimes.com) - All Rights Reserved.