

The Running Life: The Swift Retort

Explaining Your Running Life to Your Non-Running Friends

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What did you do today?

Well, I'm training for a marathon. I did my weekly long run this morning.

Oh yeah? How far did you go?

About 18 miles.

18 miles! Are you kidding? I get tired when I drive 18 miles.

How many times have you heard this? It is the classic response to a runner's cocktail party chat.

If there is any distance runner out there who has not experienced a variation on this particular exchange, I want to meet that lonely soul. Sometimes it seems that as runners we are swimming against the tide, marching to our own drummer, obeying the voices in our heads. Wait, no that's something else entirely. What I'm trying to say is that at times, to the uninitiated, a runner seems like some kind of aberrant being. Most of the time our non-running friends (and families, spouses, co-workers, and random passers-by) just don't understand why we do what we do and how it could possibly bring us such joy.

"I never see a smiling runner" is another oft-heard refrain from the uninitiated. And you know what, they're right. But I've never seen a smiling concert pianist, or a grinning baseball player at bat, or a beaming race car driver. For most people who must focus intently and maintain concentration in order to perform, the smiles come after the effort. Though you'll seldom see an expression of delight on a runner you pass on the street, do not think that it is not a delightful pursuit. It is. But running is hard. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it.

This past weekend I watched the finish of a large 10K. Standing next to me was a devoted non-runner. I leapt to this particular conclusion about my extremely well-nourished new acquaintance largely by the commentary he and his wife offered as the runners crossed the finish line in front of us. Dressed in running clothes and sporting media credentials, I appeared to be just the person to explain an alien culture to these uninitiated spectators.

We watched as a great surge of people crossed the timing mat, chips chirping merrily amid the cheers of an enthusiastic crowd.

"Jeeze," my new friend said between bites of his sandwich. "That man's shirt is covered with blood. What happened to him?"

"His nipples chafed; that happens to men sometimes. I'm told it stings a little, but doesn't hurt that much. Some men put Band-Aids on their nipples to keep it from happening," I explained.

It was either the word "nipple" twice in one sentence or the thought of the pain involved that caused the sandwich to hover in front of his face for a few extra beats, but he eventually recovered and continued his questions.

"Don't your knees hurt from all that running? I could never run, my knees couldn't take it," he said adamantly.

"You don't have to start with anything too taxing. Most people try mixing walking and running when they begin. It helps strengthen your muscles so your knees won't hurt. You should try it," I offered cheerfully, adding, "Running really does give you more energy."

He looked at me as if I had suggested he try nude bungee jumping. I was not making significant headway here.

"Look at that guy. He's gonna get sick. Eeeeeuw! Explain to me how that's fun, wouldja," he demanded.

"Well, it's hot, and he was pushing himself as hard as he could. He'll be fine in a few minutes, and I bet he'll be back next year," I replied optimistically.

With his sandwich a distant memory and a steady stream of runners still making their way to the finish, my friend and I started cheering and clapping for my peeps, my homies—the folks in the middle of the pack. Many I knew by name and would call them out as they crossed the line. In this group there were mothers running with children, an 84-year-old retiree, a gaggle of young men all dressed like Spider-Man, and 63-year-old Dick Hoyt pushing his 42-year-old son Rick in a specially modified wheelchair. Rick, who was born with cerebral palsy, has participated in hundreds of races with his father.

I could tell that the excitement, both the runners' and ours, was starting to take hold of the man beside me. He had started out stock still, not even clapping when the winners crossed the finish line. Now, more than a half hour later, he was whooping along with the rest of us.

"Way to go, Michelle," I called enthusiastically. Michelle, who was running with her husband and daughter, saw me and rushed over to give me a sweaty hug on her way out of the chute. Michelle is undergoing chemotherapy and is as bald as an egg. Her illness and her lack of hair have done nothing to diminish her beauty or her unflagging good spirits.

"Hey, she's got cancer, doesn't she?" asked the sandwich guy when Michelle had moved on. "And she's still running? She looks pretty darn good."

"She's run all through her chemotherapy," I told him. "She postponed her last treatment so she could run the race."

It was like one of those cartoons where a light bulb goes off over the character's head. My new friend's expression told me that somewhere, somehow, he was beginning to get it. Watching so many runners finish a race is always moving. I defy anyone who watches not to feel inspired. Or to understand the lure of the running life.

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