

# The Running Life: The Traveling Squad

## How running made me one of the guys

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My formative years were spent in a sports vacuum, participating neither individually nor on any team. My one physical outlet during that time and well into adulthood was dancing. Like running, ballet requires strength, stamina, discipline and dedication, though subsequent comparisons get less clear. A perfect ballerina is thin to the point of anorexia, without discernible musculature; yet strong enough to make a series of impossibly complicated physical maneuvers look like the delicate movements of a forest sprite. She should have a tiny, perfectly shaped head, a lithe, linear body, long, lyrical arms and legs, the flexibility of a contortionist, and the stamina of, well, a marathon runner.

As a dancer I was possessed of a steely determination and discipline. I was impressively motivated and in the end, I was an abysmal failure. To a great degree my failure was one of form impeding function. The incontrovertible truth is my head is big, my arms short. The lines of my body are circular rather than linear. My muscles and ligaments are so taut that I can barely touch my toes, much less gracefully rest my shin against my ear. I loved ballet, but it was a love that would never be reciprocated. By the time I reached college it was clear that the best I could hope for in the world of dance would be a career teaching tots in pink tights and tutus how to plié.

Years later I became a runner and succeeded, not in spite of my body but because of it. My muscular legs, far from being a liability, became my greatest asset. My lack of flexibility, while not particularly advantageous, would not be a major impediment to success. Other runners didn't care, or even notice, that I had curves and muscles, only that I could run. After a few races, I understood that some very good runners come in very improbable shapes and sizes. With my own decidedly unpoetic body, I could outpace and outdistance many women and even some men in my age group.

In the honeymoon period of my running career, those first heady months when every race was thrilling and the PRs were stacking up like cordwood before a New England winter, I met Dr. Andy Palmer at the Maine Running Camp. As many RT readers know, Andy Palmer was an extraordinary runner, a respected coach, and a man of unique kindness and character. Over the years, the friendship we built was enriched by our similarities as well as our differences. We were born within a few months of each other, we came from large, quirkily dysfunctional families, and we recognized in each other a "glass half full" optimism and outlook on life. We met when I was a very new runner. He was a seasoned veteran with accomplishments that would eventually earn him a place in the Maine Running Hall of Fame.

Through Andy, I got to hang out on the fringes of an exclusive cadre of male runners who gathered each year at camp. These were men who came of age during the first running boom in the '70s and who had been exceptional runners ever since. When they got together, these putative adults often reverted to habits and a language acquired in adolescence. They called each other "Coach" and referred to their informal band as the traveling squad. To be on the traveling squad you had to be funny and whip smart and above all, you had to take your running very seriously. They admired courage, tenacity, and a huge capacity for pain.

These men and the lessons I learned from them helped shape my running life. Their perspective, fostered by decades of dedication to the sport, influenced the way I developed as a runner and an athlete. They were my crash course in how to be a jock. Left to my own devices I might have been satisfied to remain a recreational runner, someone content to go out and enjoy the scenery while knocking off a handful of easy miles. While it's true that there are days when that kind of running is necessary and even welcomed, there was another side of running that I wanted to explore. The guys on the traveling squad taught me that the pursuit of excellence, demanding the most from your body, giving 100 percent day in and day out, can be the truest test of character and can transform the rest of your life.

From the beginning I wanted to be like them, to test my limits. Because I had never been a member of a team, I wanted to feel the bond, the camaraderie that teammates forge as they pursue individual and collective goals. I loved the focus and exertion of a killer workout followed by the endless deconstruction of every mile over beer and pizza. In becoming one of the guys, I found real joy spending the evening watching videos of old races and listening to the running commentary, interspersed with rude asides. I learned the meaning of true focus, finally figuring out how to let everything but the run drop away and enter "the zone." I learned the value of ego and the greater value of humility. The time I spent with the squad taught me more about running, men, and life than I had learned in all the years before meeting them.

Late one afternoon, after a particularly grueling 18 miler, we were standing thigh deep in the icy Atlantic water watching the sun go down. I made an offhanded, smartass remark that struck them all as deeply hilarious. "Hey, Coach," one of them said, "I think today she gets a place on the traveling squad, don't you?" As my eyes scanned the horizon, trying not to give away my pleasure and pride, my only thought was "How cool is that?"

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