

The Running Life: The Trophy Life

Finding Your Place in the Running World

By Candace Karu

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Candace,

I just read your article about a return to racing. I'm in the same boat as you. My husband calls me a competitive runner with recreational speed. Also remember you can almost always win some category in a race. I am currently undefeated in the 34-year-old pediatrician with three kids category.

—Sarah Lester

Last May, a column about my return to racing after a long hiatus generated a gym bag full of sympathetic responses. The one above is my favorite, both because I recognize myself in her husband's description and because it reminded me of something very important about the running life. Running allows us to create our own categories, to take our own measure in inventive new ways, and to define ourselves outside the boundaries of our "other" lives.

My own athletic limitations have challenged the credulity of even my staunchest admirers. I spent my entire educational career assiduously avoiding any activity that involved exertion. In my defense, this was back in the day, in ancient times when P.E. class involved stout, serious gym teachers, many of whom treated us more like inmates than students. My physical education was supervised by a series of joyless, dour women sporting large whistles and bad haircuts. In that terrible time before Title IX, most athletic activities for girls were, at best, boring and repetitive, taking place in a crowded, unventilated gyms across the country. There were lots of calisthenics, obscure and grindingly pointless gym games, random ball drills for games of questionable origin and outcome, and endless miles of jogging around the gym to no apparent end. All these activities were performed in our fetching, royal blue "gym suits" cunningly crafted out of scratchy, heavyweight polyester. Christie Brinkley, the supermodel of choice in the '70s, could not have made these suits look good, so you can imagine what they did for a 5-foot tall, underdeveloped ninth grader. It's no wonder that I made it my goal in life to skip as many of these classes as my inventive and devious mind would allow.

I carried my gym nightmares with me well into adulthood, until, in my 30's, I discovered the lure of running. Not only did running change my physical life, it profoundly affected me in other areas as well. All the enthusiasm in the world, however, did not change my personal reality. Running has helped me develop extraordinary determination, boundless athletic fervor, and admirable exercise habits. Given that, there is still no escaping the fact that, in spite of my physical, mental and emotional devotion to the sport, on my best days I will find myself running in the middle of the pack. As Sarah Lester's husband so accurately described: "a competitive runner with recreational speed."

And yet in my basement there is a walk-in closet. In this closet there is a shelf devoted to my hardware, what RT Senior Writer Rachel Toor would call my SMOs, my Shiny Metal Objects. In spite of my lack of talent, I have won actual trophies. These have been awarded mostly for winning or placing in my age group, often in races too small or too obscure to attract the really fast women in my state, a regrettably large and impressive group. But they are legitimate trophies and plaques, each representing a herculean effort on my part.

One of them, the smallest in the collection, features a metallic-coated plastic running figure on a faux marble base with a miniscule engraved plate. If the light is very good, and if you squint extra hard, you might just be able to make out the inscription: "First Place – Women." One beautiful summer day at a small race in Maine, I ran faster than I ever had and was the first woman to cross the finish line. It was a moment that is forever etched in my heart; never mind that the field consisted of a handful of female participants, never mind that the winning pace was far from a course record. On that day, I was a winner, both personally and publicly.

Beside that little trophy is a beautiful plaque that arrived in the mail a few weeks after I finished the Portland (Oregon) marathon. My time, neither my fastest nor my slowest marathon finish, was just under four hours. The race organizers, bless their marketing-savvy little hearts, sent me a plaque with the race logo on it that proclaimed me the First Maine Finisher. It's entirely possible I was the only Maine finisher that year, but the token still suffuses me with warm fuzzies every time I see it.

Understand that I am not one of those people who subscribes to the "just finishing a race makes you a winner" school of thought. I have too much respect for the effort and sacrifice of athletes such as Deena Kastor or Meb Keflezighi to compare my achievement to theirs. The accomplishments of elite athletes are unique and laudable, the product of innate talent, relentless training, and an incomparable desire to win.

But I do believe that running gives us all the opportunity to excel in ways both public and private. It can provide us with flashes of transcendent glory, anonymous moments that may not be recognized with hardware or Shiny Metal Objects, but moments that will stay with us for a lifetime. No matter where we finish, running allows each of us the ability to measure success and acknowledge progress, discovering the elusive pocket of personal victory somewhere toward the back of the pack.

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