

The Running Life: What I've Learned

10 Lessons From a Running Life

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As featured in the May 2007 issue of Running Times Magazine

My running is often a lot like my reading. On my nightstand there are books I read for work piled onto novels which sit next to the latest issue of the New Yorker; different reading material for different moods and needs. Like reading, running informs every aspect of my life. Following, in no particular order, are lessons learned from my running life. Whether practical or profound, these lessons have served me well, on and off the road.

I can always get faster. Granted, I might not be faster than I've ever been, but sometimes faster than I hoped or faster than yesterday or faster than my friend Carrie is fast enough. In my life, running has revealed the possibility and promise of improvement, a feeling that never gets old.

Rage is better left on the road. For me, anger has always been the emotion that paid the fewest dividends. Before I became a runner, I could stew in a soup of aggravation and annoyance for days before letting negative emotions go. Rarely did this net me any real psychic results and often the time spent wallowing left me spent and numb. Running gives me a time and place to shed those pent up feelings. It gives me room to rant; I can tell people off or give them an uncensored piece of my mind without the collateral damage of an actual encounter. Dropping the detritus of anger from my brain along the way beats an hour on the couch any day.

Men are from Mars, women are from the second planet from the sun, Earth's sister planet, which is usually covered in a thick layer of clouds . . . A book I read recently stated that on average men use about 7000 words a day while women use around 20,000. This is not a statistic that will come as a surprise to anyone who runs regularly in mixed groups.

Broken hearts heal faster on the road. A few years ago I got a very deep cut across my finger, exposing bone and muscle. As the doctor stitched me up, she warned that it could take a long time to regain full use of the mangled digit. At my two-week checkup, she marveled at how quickly I was healing. She explained that runners and other fit people had an advantage in the healing process. "The key is oxygen and blood supply," she told me. Take it from me, broken hearts benefit from similar mental and emotional fitness conveyed by years of running. A good cry on a long run has as much therapeutic effect as weeks of hiding in bed, watching old movies and eating ice cream. Add a few runs with sympathetic running friends and you're on your way to, if not a full recovery, then at least a heart on the mend. It's all about oxygen and blood supply.

Solitude is a state of grace. Cultivating the desire and ability to be alone and in the moment in our culture sometimes feels like an exercise in futility. Daily distractions can make purposeful isolation and its benefits fleeting. Running alone can put me into a meditative state where my mind can slowly and happily empty. One of the standard questions I get from non-runners is, "Don't you get bored out there?" The truth is that in the beginning I was bored. But with practice, I came to value the solitude of a solo run. Teaching me how to be alone in my own head has been one of running's most valuable lessons.

Jokes are often funnier on the road than they are when you get home. I have no idea why this is so often true. Send any thoughts or theories to the email address below.

Going outside to play should be mandatory for all adults. Recently, on a run during the morning rush hour, it started to snow. It was a typical Maine squall that came up quickly, obliterating visibility, and making driving a contact sport. I veered off the main road and made my way to a wide dirt path along the ocean. My own rush hour was not far off, but for one carefree, unfettered hour, I got to play in the snow while others fought traffic. You'd think more grownups would have figured this out by now.

Sometimes pain is its own reward. The deep ache in my quads as I make my way down a flight of steps after a grueling race, the tightness and fatigue that comes from the first hard track workout of the spring, the skinned knees and pebbly palms of a treacherous trail run — I'd take any of these over a spa day in a heartbeat.

Running can confer rock-star status among the uninitiated. Especially as I age, I find people are inordinately impressed when confronted with my relatively modest running pedigree. I am often loath to correct their perceptions, preferring to bask in the glow of admiration.

There are no strangers, only runners I haven't met. Sydney, Prague, Montpelier, Los Angeles, Jupiter, Boise, Paris, New Orleans, Copenhagen, Aiken, Reykjavik. These are all cities and towns where I arrived a stranger and left a short time later with lifelong friends. I have found running communities all over the world and each one has welcomed me without reservation. You can too.

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