

# The Running Life: What's Not to Love

## Forging Fast Friendships on the Road

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As featured in the June 2005 issue of Running Times Magazine

**After last year's election season, a time of enmity and rancor between liberal and conservative, red state and blue, Jon Stewart and Tucker Carlson, you just have to love the big story at this year's Little Rock Marathon.** Two years after embarking on a program of diet and exercise, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee had lost more than 110 pounds. In addition to the weight loss, Governor Huckabee left a diagnosis of Type II diabetes in his past. To celebrate his new-found fitness, the governor decided to train for his state's premiere marathon. Huckabee, a Republican, crossed the finish line in a respectable 4:38:59. Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack, a Democrat, also ran in Little Rock, finishing 40 minutes behind his friend, his colleague, his running buddy. Vilsack, who ran his first marathon last October in Des Moines, was invited by Huckabee to run the race at a governors' meeting in Washington earlier this year. The governors made the event a family affair. Arkansas First Lady Janet Huckabee walked the entire marathon course, while Iowa's First Lady Christie Vilsack walked the first seven miles of the race.

There are so many positive components that make up this tale, it's difficult to know where to begin. First, there is the inspiring story of a middle-aged public figure who had the courage and tenacity to make profound, positive life changes that did not involve surgery, fad diets, or any other quick fix. These changes affected not only the governor and his family; they were the impetus for changes he has helped bring about in his state and his country. Governor Huckabee has become a spokesman promoting healthy eating and fitness nationwide.

Here is a man who ate himself into roughly the size and shape of a Mini Cooper and due to his diligence and hard work found himself crossing the finish line of a marathon a scant two years later, greeted like a rock star. The footage of this event would soften even the hardest, most cynical heart. Most of us know the sheer joy that comes with a race well run. Imagine how great it was for Governor Huckabee to be cheered by hundreds of spectators. His first comment? "What do you say? Is this not cool?" Cool indeed, governor.

Even more interesting to me, however, is the bond that running forged between two men on opposite sides of the political spectrum. This unique ability to bond even those dramatically different than we are is, I believe, one of the enduring gifts bestowed upon runners the day they set out on their first mile. One of the universal truths of the running world is that it allows us all to meet and get to know, often quite intimately, people we would otherwise never encounter in our everyday lives.

There are certainly some solitary runners who eschew the company of others, but for most of us, running is a social activity as well as a physical one. The camaraderie of the roads is often as compelling as the running itself. It is inevitable that one enhances the other, encourages the other, shapes the other.

From elite training camps to casual Sunday running groups, community adds a dimension to the act of running that is incomparable and unsurpassed. At ZAP Fitness, an elite post-collegiate training facility in the mountains of North Carolina, eight to 10 runners and their coaches live, train and work together. The goal of each of these young runners is simply to become the best in the country. The energy the athletes expend in pursuing this dream is compounded by the presence of others who share their vision of the future of American running. Encouragement, understanding and commiseration help everyone at the facility train harder, work smarter, and mine more joy from the experience.

You don't have to train like an elite runner to derive the benefits of a tightknit running community. All over the world there are groups of every size and description getting together to celebrate love: love of running, love of running with others, and the bond that comes with it. Though these groups vary widely in size, structure and organization, they have one defining trait in common—connection.

Connection also defines those unique, complicated and beneficial one-on-one relationships that running can bring us. Though many runners use the term "running buddy" to describe myriad running bonds, many of us have that special someone in our lives, someone who will listen for the 100th time how unfair our boss is or how abominably a teenager is behaving or, in a relatively rare case, how tough it is to balance a state's budget.

A true running buddy will meet you at 5:30 on a winter morning to help you get in shape to run Boston. That buddy will motivate you, or browbeat you if necessary, into attaining lofty goals. Secrets shared with such a buddy are sacred. "What's said on a run stays on a run," is the implied rule for these relationships. A running buddy can be a spouse, a parent, or a child. Your buddy may be the same sex or opposite, older or younger, just like you or wildly different. Your friendship might extend beyond your time on the roads or it may be confined to those few precious hours you spend running together.

What these irreplaceable friendships born of running remind us is how fortunate we are to be runners, to be part of a community. A community founded on respect for each other, respect for the environment, and respect for the endeavor. And, love for the running life.

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