

## WHAT MAKES MEN RUN

By

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Most people do not want to run. This is because their food comes in cans. They have nothing to run for. Schoolboys now look upon running as a penance, and so they take short cuts, or catch a bus. Yet, a very small number of people do want to run, and small boys actually like to and feel compelled to. Why do we run?

There are reasons which, while they are not of first importance, are worth considering. Running with other people involves membership of a club. Here, for some, is a reason for running, though mostly it is a side-track and not a very convincing one. If a man is looking for a place where he can meet others and find companionship of a very under-developed kind, then he might join a club. Therefore, he would, for a while, be a runner of sorts. Yet it is of first significance that such a man is never held by the club indefinitely, for it is the true athlete who gives to a club and stays with it when he can no longer call himself an athlete, not the man who joins because a club-house is somewhere to go.

Then there is wanting to run, where the words "wanting to" really mean half wanting to, or wanting to but not being able to pursue the fact, or wanting to but never really finding out what this implies. Here we meet those men who would like to succeed but will not do the work. Such people do indulge in running, turn out even two or three times a week, but cannot, on the evidence available, be said to want to run. They have perhaps caught a momentary attitude, prompted by the climate in which athletics has recently had to exist (and which has done it no good at all). Running has been dramatized lately, equated with climbing Everest, or marked down as the poor man's rehabilitation of his soul; and the result has been a special kind of bluff. After all, running is an enjoyable and fruitful activity. It is, not when considered honestly and objectively, all that it is made out to be. And that is not to demote it, but merely to see it for what it is. If we can do this, we can understand why we run and we can hold off the poseur who vaguely feels that athletics will allow him the opportunity of cutting a fine figure.

We run because we are town-bred and do not want to be; because we cannot find an outlet elsewhere; and, crucially, because running is something which almost all of us could do, could succeed at, could accept as a challenge which gives a vast number of occasions for acquittal, since every training run and every race is a test of what we have done and what remains to be done.

Some people born and misbred in the remains of a nineteenth century town, are lucky enough to find out what it is like to run across a field in the snow. When once you have done this, you will have found a sufficient reason for running. It is a physical pleasure, felt on the nerve endings. Or, for a small group of people, running may be something which gives the dignity of accomplishment, just as any kind of sheer application provides a tunnel for those who started badly. It is difficult to imagine a man not cherishing his dignity. So it is not surprising that a boy should like to run, when he finds that it stamps him as an individual to be noted. His name is on the program, perhaps in the paper, and he always looks for it. For this reason, which is not the best but is part of the most important, some athletes are athletes, just as some workmen wear bowler hats.

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Yet, at the bottom of all these reasons for running, and fundamentally the reason for wanting to run, where that implies a real importance to the individual of the competitive activity, is the recognition that the track, the cross-country course or the roads, imply challenge and test, bring you out into the open, show yourself to yourself and, therefore, force a kind of recognition.

This is why performance-lists and statistics are so dull; they tell no real truth and give no inkling of the flesh behind their very dry bones. They are off in the wrong direction. The mile in 4:10 may hide a gifted runner who was too weak in character to break four minutes, and the mile in 4:10 may hide punishing effort and dedication; the fact that the watch ticked by is not at all important. Because the watch often does not show success, that does not mean that it is not there. It has a subtle form. The search for it is a reason for running; in finding success, of whatever kind and at whatever level, a man is helped to tighten his character.

"Now bid me run, and I will strive with things impossible;  
yea; get the better of them."

An endurance runner often thinks he is choosing a socially approved and oriented activity but soon discovers his new way of life is one of isolation and loneliness. The rest of his world finds it hard to understand a man who deliberately chooses the hard way, the way of daily rigorous routine and hardship. This alone sets him apart. But the full extent of his astrangement from his fellow-men does not really hit him until, an hour or so before the race is to start, he suddenly feels the enormity of the task before him. Now for the first time he understands why Alan Sillitoe called his short story, "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner."

But there are compensations for this, for as condition and control are acquired, the runner gradually senses that he has found a harmony within himself and with all about him that is certainly different and perhaps greater than he has ever known before.

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