



the FINISHING KICK

BY RACHEL TOOR

Why They Hate Us

Considering the view from the non-runner perspective

You know what it's like. You've been injured, so you've had to take some time off from running. Or you've been traveling. Or it's the holiday season, and your officemates keep bringing in ungodly heaps of cookies, candy and cake. You eat and eat and don't run. You gain five pounds. You feel awful, like a big fat slob. You can grab your normally flat-as-Iowa belly and—yuck—pinch flesh.

You're sitting around at lunch with your coworkers, picking at a chef salad, sipping a Diet Coke. You share your feelings: "I am so fat. I have to lose this weight."

You look at your plate to spear a tomato and don't realize that your companions—normal people, good people, non-running civilians—are glaring at you, wanting to shove that tomato right up your nose.

I know that it matters. I know that five extra pounds on a runner can feel like 50. We are acutely aware of the fluctuations in our own bodies, we hard-core runners. We pay attention to the color of our pee. We notice not only which muscles hurt, but which tendons, which fascia. No matter how thin we are compared to the rest of the world, we think about what we eat. But our (Atkins-dieting, waist-watching, struggling-to-lose-that-last-15-pounds) friends do not want to look at our skinny-ass bodies and hear that we feel fat. Nor do they really want to watch us wolf down enormous plates of pasta, scarf up all the bread on the restaurant table, or never be able to go more than two hours without a snack.

Likewise, complaining that we haven't had a chance to get our daily run in doesn't endear us to those who already feel guilty about not getting enough exercise. Bitching about how tired we are after a race—a 10K, a marathon, a 50-miler—just isn't cricket. We not only sign up to do these for fun, we pay money for the privilege. We shouldn't whine. But we do. We whine a lot, mostly to those who love us.

And those who love us often do not love our running. How many of our romantic relationships are threatened by the fact that at eight (or seven or six) every Sunday morning we jump out of bed to join our weekly long-run group, a ritual that is as profound and important as church-going is for some? Other people laze around together in bed, or they drink coffee and read aloud to each other funny or interesting bits from the newspaper. But we're up to train, or off to the races.

The races. Many of the readers of *Running Times* have already cleaned up and changed while the great unwashed masses are still chugging along on the course. How many of us are still there at the bitter end, cheering for those who are finishing as the chute is being torn down? It's a lot harder on the body to run a five-hour marathon than it is to finish in three.

But we diss those five-hour marathoners. We sneer at the idea of stopping to walk, or to drink, or hell, to take photos on the way. How often have you heard your running buddies spit out the word

"Galloway?" And you don't even have to be super-fast to feel superior. Remember the "I beat Oprah" T-shirts that appeared after one of our most inspiring national figures ran Marine Corps? Just as Oprah set off a ripple of reading with her book club, the woman deserves credit for getting people out there, training for and running marathons. I love it that when you ask some of these folks what their time was, they don't always know. If you ask a speedster, you'll get it down to the second. Who is more healthy?

Like Popeye, we are what we are. We come together as a community, sharing conventions and conversational tics. We recognize each other from a distance; we are able to connect quickly when we meet. I love runners. I feel at home at races. But it might serve us well to remember that when we are out among the rest of the world, we can look a whole lot like skinny, neurotic, whining, competitive freaks.

I was reminded of this recently when I asked a non-running friend if he wanted to volunteer at a local club race. What's not to love, I thought? You get to be outdoors on a beautiful day, and all you have to do is hand out cups of water or read the time aloud as it goes by in minutes and seconds. Surely this would be an irresistible allure. Boy did I ever hear about how wrong that notion was.

They complain if there's not the "right" kind of sports drink, he said. They snarl if you don't read the time loudly enough, or as frequently as they want to hear it. They don't say thank you and they act as if they are each the center of the world. No thanks, he said.

It's not always that way. In fact, I'd venture to say that the longer the race, the more gracious the runners are. Volunteers in ultras are often greeted with the kind of joyful expression most of us save for the flower delivery guy. When you're running a very long race you know you can't do it alone; you know that the quality of your experience depends on the generosity of those willing to cater to odd dietary needs, to help remove shoes from feet that look like hamburger meat, and to throw warm blankets around shivering shoulders. It's often said that a person's truest self comes out during a 100-mile race, where layers of inhibition and carefully constructed public selves are shed as the hours drag by. What you hear from many volunteers at these races is that they get to see the best of humanity.

But we shouldn't have to bring ourselves to depletion to remember that we are able to do what we love to do because other people put up with us. Instead of railing against the pathetic state of American distance running, instead of whining about the lack of TV coverage of our sport, instead of whispering about drug use—real or imagined—how about taking a step back to appreciate non-runners and, when we're in their world, to moderate, or at least reflect on, our own behavior. Because one day, due to injury, age, or plain-old burnout, we may be joining their ranks. ■