

Endurance Running: A Socio-Cultural Examination

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by William Bridel, Pirkko Markula & Jim Denison (Eds.)

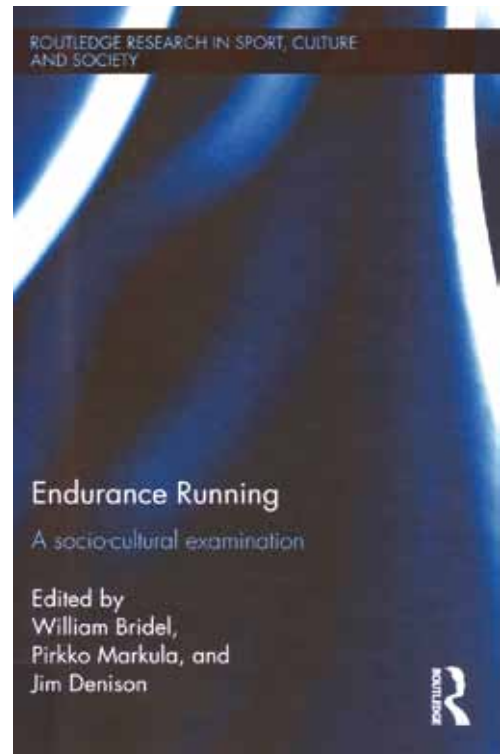
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Running is the most elementary of sports activities. More and more, people are choosing it as a leisure time pursuit and as a tool for the promotion of health and the prevention of illnesses related to a sedentary lifestyle. However, this has not always been the case.

In the 1940s, for example, running was seen as a boring and painful pursuit, and into the 1960s recreational jogging along the street, in a park or in a forest was perceived as a disruption of the social code between pedestrians and thus an affront to the existing public order. If people ran in public it was mainly because they were in a hurry. Otherwise, it was regarded as a waste of energy and, therefore, people practising leisure-time running risked being scoffed at and jeered.

All this changed in the 1970s with the so-called running boom, initiated by American track stars Frank Shorter, winner of the 1972 Munich Olympic Marathon, and Steve Prefontaine. Other factors included Prefontaine's acclaimed coach Bill Bowerman, the acceptance of women not only as runners but as athletes across all sports, increased media coverage and new events such as the New York and Chicago marathons. In this period running developed from the obsession of a few to an accepted form of exercise and nationwide fad.

Today, running holds an important place in popular culture. The number of fun runs has exploded and major road races are routinely over-subscribed. Footpaths are more con-



gested. Fluoro-coloured running shoes are no longer reserved for running, but can now be the perfect accessory to any outfit. Analysts have termed the current period in running history the 'second running boom' and estimated that 200 million people worldwide have taken to running in the last ten years. Running has become fashionable, and being a runner is now considered cool.

Against this background, *Endurance Running: A Socio-Cultural Examination* is the first collection of original qualitative research with a general objective of understanding the concept and meaning of endurance running in both history and contemporary times.

In their introductory chapter, “Critical considerations of runners and running”, editors William Bridel, Pirkko Markula and Jim Denison take up John Bale’s statement that an “understanding of running cannot be achieved by simply looking at runners” and draw out some of the main themes from the existing socio-cultural work on distance running including: 1) the ways well-known middle- and long-distance runners are represented in various forms of media to examine the media’s significant role in the reification of dominant ideologies, and 2) socio-cultural readings of the running body.

The book is organised into three sections “Running Beginnings”, “Running Because”, and “Running Bodies”. This offers a unique analytical structure to approach running: the object of study, the types of research questions asked, the methodological approach, and the theoretical framework. The scholars contributing to this book examine mass, elite, and disabled running/runners through the use of textual analysis, interviews, and personal experiences and with great theoretical breadth: Bourdieu, Butler, Deleuze, Foucault, Ingold, Lefebvre, post-structuralism, physical cultural studies, sociological phenomenology, and critical sport psychology. Such a comprehensive approach reveals the ways that the biological, historical, psychological, and sociological perspectives converge to form contextually specific ideas about running and runners, which are often ignored in strict, i.e. experimental, cognitive/behavioural and physiological investigations.

The four chapters of the first section entitled “Running Beginnings” consider the “histories” of different kinds of distance events and increased participation in endurance running.

Mary Louise Adams (“‘Astounding exploits’ and ‘laborious undertakings’: nineteenth-century pedestrianism and the cultural meanings of endurance”) offers a socio-historical account of nineteenth-century long-distance pedestrian events with a goal of historicising endurance in relationship to other notions of endurance circulating in the same historical context and as its emergence as a prized athletic quality. The analysis of endurance challenges (here, two specific pedestrian events) allows for an interrogation of the “shifts in the meanings of endurance and the kinds of ideological work that performances of endurance might have accomplished” (p. 22). When placing these early constructions of endurance vis-à-vis pedestrianism into conversation with the other explorations of running beginnings, however, perhaps not all that much has changed.

Gavin Weedon (“On the entangled origins of mud running: ‘over-civilization,’ physical culture, and overcoming obstacles in the Spartan Race”) analyses the rather recent beginnings of obstacle course racing and mud runs. He does so by looking to historical constructions of physical activity, the “outdoors,” and urbanisation and the similar narratives emerging in these “new” forms of endurance challenges. Weedon calls into question the “newness” of mud runs, events that while appearing relatively recently in the endurance sportscape seem to reproduce the principles and values aligned with physical cultural movements of the 19th century: most notably a desire to “return to nature” and more arduous physical practices as a way for people to create new senses of self in post-modern times.

Joseph P. Mills and Jim Denison (“Charting the development of contemporary endurance running training theory”) provide insights into over 70 years of distance running training practices, employing a Foucauldian lens to trace the formation of key concepts in contemporary endurance training. They argue that scientific knowledge and dominant notions of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency circulating in the larger social context limited ideas

about how coaches train distance runners to endure and they question the innovativeness of the coaches' training methods discussed in this chapter: "Were all of these coaching icons just doing variations of the same thing: more science, more discipline, more toughness?" (p. 58) According to Mills and Denison, even today "effective endurance running training can still be summarised in one sentence: the systematic energy conversion of the body via meticulously controlled and structured running methods." (p. 58) But "there are no laws that state that this way of thinking is the only way to train endurance runners [...] what if endurance running coaches began to emphasise gentle *not* tough exercises and workouts, or uncontrolled and truly spontaneous *not* controlled and regulated workouts or awkward *not* efficient workouts? What if endurance running coaches began to imagine workouts inspired by something other than science, discipline, and hard work? For it is only through imagining advances (read knowledge) outside the loom, outside science's strict protocols and procedures, that true innovations in endurance running will occur." (p. 59)

In the final chapter in this section, Laura Chase ("Beyond Boston and Kathrine Switzer: women's participation in distance running") adopting a critical cultural studies theoretical perspective, explores the experiences of women in distance running from the late 1960s through to today, with a particular focus on elite women's running, gender and cause-based running, and the creation of the "Athena" divisions (ranging from 145 to 180+ pounds). Chase reminds the reader that one must always be conscious of whose history is being told and why. While undoubtedly Kathrine Switzer is an important figure in the development of women's involvement in distance running in the United States, it is imperative that the stories of individuals such as Roberta Gibb, Merry Lepper, Fred Lebow, and others be told and understood. The same is true for key events that have resulted from and contributed to the increased participation of women in elite and non-elite distance running. Alto-

gether, Chase produces an historical narrative about distance running while simultaneously highlighting the way that the sport and notions of endurance have been shaped by and resisted dominant gender ideology.

The second section, "Running Because", has an overall aim of exploring the "why" of *why run* or *why running*? However, in the spirit of this book, and the academic disciplines represented by the authors, these explorations go beyond celebratory accounts of running.

Pirkko Markula ("Foot trouble: the minimalist running movement"), drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of capitalism as a type of fabric, surveys the space occupied by the minimalist running movement within the striated space of (North American) capitalism. The popularity of the minimalist running movement is investigated from the original design of the Nike Free shoes, to Christopher McDougall's best selling book *Born to Run*, to scientific research debating the "naturalness" of barefoot running for all bodies.

Also drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, in his textual analysis of *Runner's World* magazine, Richard Pringle ("Disrupting identity: an affective embodied reading of *Runner's World*") contributes a polyvocal reading of the pains and pleasures of endurance running that seeks to move beyond the limitations of post-structuralist accounts of physical activity and explore the malleable relationship between the social and biological. He suggests that "running should not be thought of as a practice for select 'identities' (e.g., young, fit, thin, black/white bodies), but simply as an affective practice by the bodies that run. By thinking of runners by what they do and their effects/emotions, there are possibilities for disrupting running identity categories so that runners do not just conceive of themselves, for example, as 'white-runners' or 'gay-runners' or 'aged-runners' or 'male-runners': identity categories that possibly constrain what individuals think they can or should do." (p. 108)

Michael D. Giardina, Ryan King-White, and Kyle Bunds (“Boston strong: sport, terror/ism, and the spectacle pedagogy of citizenship”) turn to popular narratives about the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, endurance, and terrorism in a so-called “post-racial” America to provide an analysis of the meaning of running and running events in the larger context, as opposed to the meaning individuals make of their participation in running.

Following in the tradition of using individual runners as an entry point to conversations about larger social issues, Theresa Walton-Fisette (“Lopez Lomong: enduring life”) unpacks the story of Lopez Lomong, South Sudanese-born American 1500m runner and flag bearer for the United States during the 2008 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony, and the different experiences/meanings/constructions of endurance in his life, with a particular interest in considering identities as embodied processes. Walton-Fisette uses Lomong’s life story to consider the central role of the body in subjectivation, but also the various meanings that endurance has held for Lomong throughout his life, oftentimes a source of joy, hope, and inspiration.

Casting a critical eye on narratives about three Canadian paralympic “inspirational endurance athletes” (i.e., Terry Fox, Steve Fonyo, and Rick Hansen), Danielle Peers (“Enduring disability, ableism, and whiteness: three readings of inspirational endurance athletes in Canada”) applies “supercrip” critique and a more contextual genealogical analysis to illustrate enduring (and intersecting) forces of ableism, colonialism, and neo-liberalism in the Canadian context.

The authors contributing chapters to the “Running Bodies” section explore different running populations, the experiences of and meanings assigned to running, and the potential relationships between popular discourses about endurance and individual lived experiences to gain more critical understanding about running and running bodies.

The first of these is Holly Thorpe (“‘My hormones were all messed up’: understanding female runners’ experiences of amenorrhea”). She theorises the body as both biological and socially constructed in an effort to understand amenorrhea as prevalent in the experiences of female recreational runners.

Maylon Hanold (“Ultra running: space, place, and social experience”) provides insights into the way male and female ultra runners make sense of endurance through the experiences of their bodies, but also the meaning ascribed to the spaces where ultra running takes place.

Marie-Josée Perrier and William Bridel (“An interdisciplinary conversation about running between two academics who run”) contemplate their own (very non-elite) involvement in distance running to engage in an interdisciplinary conversation about (their) running bodies and “identities” from micro (i.e., exercise and sport psychology) and macro (i.e., sociology) perspectives, ultimately calling into question the disciplinary rigidity that complicates interdisciplinary work.

P. David Howe (“Hitting a purple patch: building high performance runners at Runtleborough University”) uses representational fiction to consider the production of elite distance-running bodies in relation to space, time, and disciplinary training practices (similar to the one critiqued by Mills and Denison). He ultimately argues that runners must be connected to their corporeality in order to be successful.

In the final chapter of the third section, John Hockey and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (“Digging in: the sociological phenomenology of ‘doing endurance’ in distance-running”) draw on autoethnographic/autophenomenographic data to explore the phenomenology of endurance while also considering the relationship between individual, sensorial experiences and socio-cultural context.

In their concluding chapter (“Enduring ideas”), William Bridel, Pirkko Markula, and Jim Denison sum up the main ideas of each contribution to their book and hypothesise that their “three-pronged” approach to the phenomenon of endurance running might be a model for the sociological investigation of other endurance sports and perhaps also of speed, strength, power, and flexibility sports.

Each of the 14 chapters in this book, on its own, offers important insights about distance running historically and in contemporary times. And it is also true that – as the editors state in their introductory chapter – when taken up as a whole an even greater understanding of man’s longstanding fascination with the concept of endurance can be gained.

To sum it up, *Endurance Running* is an essential work for anybody interested in the socio-cultural side of running. The book sets out a comprehensive and multi-facetted analysis of a contemporary leisure-time activity, whose

research for the most part is dominated by scientific perspectives that tend to quantify running into only the three aspects of duration, intensity and frequency. But readers be warned: The book is no easy read and one must study each chapter closely to follow the complex and sometimes rather abstract trends of thought. But it is worth the effort!

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