
The Meaning Of Running In America

For centuries, humans have run for various reasons: to avoid war, test their physical fitness, or for leisure. Yet, while running has been consistently practiced throughout history in various countries around the world, the United States didn't face its running boom until the 1970s. At this time, running was transformative in that a once used torture method in the Victorian Era turned into an activity practiced by the majority of Americans as a standard method of cardio. Soon, the competitive racing culture took off, and Americans began to practice the sport regularly at an elite level. The 26.2-mile distance that killed Pheidippides after running from Marathon to Athens later became a widely popular racing distance in America. Major cities organized routes that are still run along to this day by thousands of athletes, who train tirelessly year round.

Some may ask, who would compete in a sport that requires year-long dedication and enormous physical strain? The question itself shows that runners don't run hundreds to thousands of miles a year to simply collect road race prize money. Runners compete in the sport because the act can teach a runner about what they're capable physically and mentally. The running boom in America encouraged thousands of runners and gave the promise of a better self-understanding and level of fitness, even if they were new to the sport. Following the running boom in America during the 1970s, Americans continued to run stride-in-stride in an increasingly popular movement. The sport of running is dynamic in that it continues to advance throughout the years with developments in nutrition, proper racing gear, and proper race preparation, which all allow for a higher standard and physical caliber of athletes within the field of running. The story of Pheidippides and the marathon that resulted in his death is a popular one. What many people are unaware of is that Pheidippides first ran from Athens to Sparta to gather troops prior to running from Marathon to Athens. The distance that resulted in this death was far longer than a marathon, it totaled approximately 150 miles. Yet, this race was not practiced by all Greeks.

Pheidippides was among a group of runners called hemerodromos or "day long runners", who trained on rocky, mountainous trails for extremely long distances. Only a select group trained for these distances and had the physical capabilities to run in this manner. It wouldn't be until centuries later for the general population to take up running as a staple activity in their lives, rather than an activity practiced by an elite group. As time progressed, the act of running became less selective: people of all classes, heights, weights, and genders took part as the sport transformed from a war-focused effort to a joyous act. The 1970s running boom in America drew 25 million Americans to the sport of running. Running competitively in road races as well as simply for the act gained popularity quickly. Women were shielded from competitive physical activity in the past due to the weighty pressure of the cult of domesticity, yet the running movement became largely available to them over the years. In 1972, Title IX was passed and persuaded many to allow women to participate in more events outside of education as discrimination based on sex became illegal and immoral. It stated that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance".

The question as to why so many Americans, men, and women, joined the movement of running

has been explored by historians. One cause of the significant number of new runners was due to various literary works published at the time that backed the importance of running, such as "The Complete Book of Running" by James Fuller Fixx. "The Complete Book of Running" was published in 1977 and discussed the ranging benefits of running such as better self-confidence and abilities to handle pressure. Fixx's book spent eleven weeks at number one bestseller and sold over a million copies. Although Fixx died at a young age despite his daily runs, Americans continued in his footsteps. Fixx had great success, many other authors shared the same success with their own running novels. In addition to literature, the excitement surrounding important Olympic races drew excitement to running. Famous women runners such as Mary Slaney boasted impressive performances on the track and caught the attention of many aspiring runners. Kathrine Switzer, known for entering races with her initials to disguise her gender won the 1974 New York City Marathon. Her participation in the sport of running in some of its most challenging distance events inspired women to do the same and join running.

Joan Benoit, a middle and long distance runner was a monumental female figure at this time and later went on to become the first woman to win an Olympic marathon in Los Angeles in 1984. As these women raced side by side with men who were in disbelief that women could compete in the same race as they did, young girls, teenagers, and middle-aged mothers made the choice to follow in their footsteps and step outside their comfort zones. America's involvement in the Olympic games was significant. America's first Olympic team competed the 1896 summer games in Athens. Americans were the most successful athletes in terms of gold medals, beating host nation Greece. We have hosted eight Olympic games over the years and American athletes have scored 2,522 medals (1,022 gold) between 1896 and 2018. Margaret Ives Abbott was the first American woman to win an Olympic event at the 1900 Paris Games. Nike Women posted its first women-specific ad with the line, "Put an end to women's suffrage," featuring a female version of the iconic Waffle Trainer shoe that Prefontaine famously wore. While Americans have looked to Olympic performances with awe, the exposure of health benefits produced by running was applicable to every American who took up running, not simply the elites.

Running was often referred to as the "most democratic sport" because it is able to be practiced and the health benefits enjoyed by most people without needing equipment, a team, or a court. These benefits were published in literary works as well as echoed by doctors themselves. President Carter's doctor, William M. Luklash believed that running elongated the length of life as well as help in weight loss, lowering blood pressure and cholesterol, quitting smoking among other things. In addition, running improves cardiovascular health, muscle endurance, and quality of life. The benefits are immeasurable: "Scientists have used the carbon-dioxide challenge test to determine the connection between anxiety sensitivity and physical activity. They found that more physically active people were less likely to panic in fearful situations even if they have anxiety sensitivity". Running has also been proven to increase confidence, elevate mood, stimulate productivity, and also promote better sleep among runners. The many health benefits are recognized by runners time and time gain, drawing more to the sport.

A additional development within the field of running that increased the popularity of the sport included increased research on the link between better performance and faster times with and proper nutrition. The study NURMI, " Nutrition and Running High Mileage" explores the links between different diets such as vegan and vegetarian and how these diets impacted or did not affect running ability. Carb loading also became popular. After physiologist Gunvar Ahlborg explained how carbohydrates positively impact endurance and glycogen stores, eating high

amounts of carbs became mainstream and a ritual for many runners. Some athletes will eat high carb meals such as pasta, bread, and potatoes the night or days leading up to a race in preparation. There was also advancements in running gear and technology. Companies such as Nike created mass produces sneakers as well as compression attire in order to promote faster times. Compression gear is known to stimulate blood flow and can be seen in compression sleeves and socks. With time, a more diverse range of sneakers has grown: some for high arches, some for flat footed runners, some for trail running, and some specifically for the road. If you look to the track in the present day, most runners will have spikes, otherwise known as racing flats on. These lightweight trainers minimize drag made by big clunky sneakers and are specifically made for racing, resembling a sock. Extra traction is given with screw-in metal spiked on the bottom of most spikes.

Garmin has also released an assortment of watches such as the Garmin Forerunner 235, which help athletes stay on pace and hit required splits in workouts and races. These watches often have built-in heart rate monitors and provide information such as VO2 max. Once runners have updated their running wardrobe, they often worked to create the best training plan in preparation for races such as a half-marathon, a marathon, or simply a five-kilometer run. Training used to most often consist of low mileage runs at quick paces. As time progressed, coaches began to create precise weekly-planning which incorporate a variance of runs. A smart weekly plan incorporates a track or interval workout which can help a runner adjust to their race pace, other tempo runs that build up the cardiorespiratory system of the runner, rest days to allow muscle rejuvenation following difficult days, and possibly even an off day towards the end of the week to prepare athletes for an upcoming week of work.

The differences in runs as opposed to a standard, weekly set of runs helps runners build different muscles and establish their strengths in different spheres. Weekly running plans nowadays typically have higher mileage and require runners to complete strength of cross training as well in order to prevent injury and create the best results on race day. Over the years, more Americans and other around the globe have come to realize how has revealed and challenged human potential. The first instance that the four-minute mile was broken was on May 6th, 1956 and 23 days later, the first woman broke five minutes in the mile. Running a mile in four minutes translates to a speed of 15 miles per hour. The current world record for the men's one-mile race is 3:43.13. The current record for the women's one mile is 4:12.56. While new records in this event have not been set as recently, they are closely matched regularly.

As developments in the sphere of running continue to grow, world records change. A handful of scientists have suggested that human beings could potentially run up to forty miles per hour (for reference, Usain Bolt reaches a top speed of 28 miles per hour in the 100 meter sprint) yet our speed is limited because muscles can only move so fast, and take a certain amount of force when hitting the ground. With strength training and further research, muscle composition could be changed and it is possible that additional advancements could possibly change the game of running and sprinting. The prominence in strength training has made its way into every aspiring runner's weekly schedule. Distance runners, who are known to be scrawny are challenging the stereotype by hitting the gym. Having lean muscle to surround the bones prevents injury and betters running times, which is why many athletes have included it over the years as experts weighed in on the importance of it. As new records are set, people of all ages are drawn to the sport. Many highschoolers in particular have hopped on the sport of running and embraced it's powerful lessons. Athletes start running in middle-school or before then in preparation for highschool.

The increased competitiveness and organized training in high school leads many young people to set new high-school records. With the creation of social media, runners can share new records, provide motivation for others, and give insight as to how to become a better runner and competitor. Lots of high school sports teams create accounts on social media and connect with other teams through Instagram or other platforms similar to that. With the ability to share, runners can connect and share information, leading to increased performance. Many runners are motivated by the notion that they can run in college. In some cases, colleges scout runners at meets or races and then go on to view their social media accounts. Often, runners received letters from coaches through email or even at their high schoolers. These athletes will go on to run either division one, division two, or division three at the collegiate level, which is incredibly demanding.

Overall, there is undoubtedly an increased competitive culture that has been progressing with time. Whether or not this is societal in general or specific to the running world is not up for debate, but how this competitive culture has influenced the sport of running is interesting to mention. This need to be the best on a team or in a race has led many runners to increase their mileage and sometimes make sacrifices to the sport. Wanting to come through the finish line in the top spot is a goal of many runners. While some competition allows for everyone to be better overall, too much competition can create a toxic environment. This can be seen with many running clubs created in years past and in the present in America. Consisting of many members, some only excerpt elites, these runners enter in five-kilometer runs together. These teams can either be beneficial to a runner: give motivation, support, and pride, or be harmful: toxic, full of competition, or unhealthy.

“Over-competition in sport is problematic for children’s mental health. Some competition is fine to keep them focused, but too much is a problem. It’s bad for the less athletic kids because they feel bad they may be letting the team down, and rejected if they are dropped. But it’s also a problem for the high-achievers who can become anxious about their performance. To make the most of the enduring mental health benefits from sport, it should be about enjoyment and passion, physical exercise, learning new skills, socialising, and working together at shared tasks.” Over the years, the people of America and the people of the world laced up their shoes and started to run. They realized that it can be painful. They noticed the aches and pains the following day when they were new to the sport. But they cherished the high they felt as they completed a hard run in the rain or track workout in solitude. The sport is demanding and many people quit running before giving it a chance. Yet, each year, Americans attempt to participate in the sport. Some develop a drive to get better and a love for the sport.

Many will run their entire life, until it is no longer possible. The runners that desperately want to improve have looked to all aspects of their health and how they can improve their running, outside of running. The developments in gear and nutrition, as well as planned training have drastically changed how runners attack the sport. These developments not only make times faster when all put in the same boat, but they create excitement. The running market is booming because running has been a staple method of cardio, stress relief, and enjoyable for Americans throughout history. While wars have been fought, economic depressions faced, and disagreements made throughout American history, Americans have been able to let off stress in a healthy way through running through these times. Running has, and has changed many people's lives for the better, bringing them out of dark places that seemed inescapable. The act of running has invoked a purpose in many lives especially in the youth of America, who are fostering an increased appreciation for the great sport of running, appreciating it for everything

that it has done for their predecessors and continues to do for the people of the present. Through changing times, running is a constant in American history because its effects are addictive and it opens its arms up to anyone of any background to join the sport and enjoy its innumerable benefits in their lives.

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