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# Long-Distance Running

BY HANNAH ELLIOTT

Achieving a personal goal in a race or enjoying a long slow jog down a wooded path brings such joy that I wish I could keep running long after that day's time limit or my body allows. Few activities match running's ability to form a refreshing connectedness to nature, the self, and God.

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In the classic film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell tells his sister, who worries that his training for the 1924 Olympics has deferred plans to work at a mission in China, that cultivating his God-given talent is a way of honoring Him: "I believe that God made me for a purpose – for China. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

I know what Liddell meant. The fabled runners' high is no misnomer. Training diligently and then achieving a personal goal in a race, or enjoying a long slow jog down a wooded path, often returns such joy, contentment, optimism, and confidence that I sometimes wish I could keep running long after that day's time limit or my body allows.

Running is perhaps the purest expression of human physicality in the world. Anyone can do it, almost anywhere, and with no special equipment required – some of the best runners on the planet do not even wear shoes. Few activities can match its ability to form a refreshing connectedness to nature, the self, and God.



In a professional sports culture where tailgate parties often sink to gluttonous booze fests, millionaire crybabies defy referees, and amped-up man-boys refuse to listen to their coaches (or obey the law), the solitary life of the long-distance runner provides a welcome respite from the hype. When athletic contests become about entertaining an audience, creating a celebrity image, or making money, the true nature of sport dies, and with it

the joy that naturally results from using a body and mind created by God.

But long-distance running, thankfully (and not surprisingly), has escaped the circus that accompanies sports more easily commandeered by publicity.

On high school and collegiate cross country teams, one of the first things coaches emphasize is that the season is made mostly in the first weeks and months of training—how well we train in August affects how fast we run in November. We learn that there are no shortcuts to quicker legs, stronger arms, and ever more efficient lungs.

That emphasis on daily discipline, wise training, and soundness of mind and body reverberates throughout the Bible, especially in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. We are exhorted to rejoice in our youth, to let our hearts be pleasant during the days of our young man- (and woman-) hood, and to follow the impulses of our heart—all the while knowing that God will judge how we devote our energy (Ecclesiastes 11:9). We are told that if the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened (or, say, if we are out of shape), more strength and skill will bring success (Ecclesiastes 10:10); a wise son accepts discipline (Proverbs 13:1); the precious possession of a man is diligence (Proverbs 12:27); and the hand of the diligent worker will make him rich (Proverbs 10:4).

I understand now that these life lessons instilled in me by coaches and running mentors—lessons that I once thought were common-sense ideas—are not so common. In the professional world showing up on time, following through on a commitment, and diligently finishing projects to the best of one's ability are often the exception, not the rule.

Running offers the simple joy of using the physical body as part of an abundant life. Runners tend to develop healthy practices. The habits of waking early, eating whole food, stretching, meditating, and learning the limits and possibilities of the human body, I attribute directly to a background in running—and running with people of the same persuasions.

The loneliness of the long-distance runner is well-known, but it may be more of a myth than anything. I have met my closest friends while running. An hour-long run leaves a lot of room for conversation, and scenic views make one susceptible to philosophizing about life's mysteries with whoever happens to be nearby. Plato said it best: "You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."

Only part, maybe even the lesser part, of running is physical.

Running—especially long-distance running—requires a certain centered sense of self, a groundedness that does not get ruffled by detractors, or early-morning wake-up calls. A calm wherewithal that accepts, even embraces, inclement weather. A physical courage that is not diminished as another hill comes into view. If runners do not have those attributes when they start running, all the better: they will develop them through miles and miles of road, wood, and trail.

Running is a simple, quick mood-booster with no ill side effects. If I leave the doorstep feeling agitated, depressed, or angry, I almost certainly will not feel that way when I return.

Consistent runners can point to specific runs that somehow conjured up novel insights about themselves, their spouses, parents, or friends. In the words of author and cardiologist George Sheehan, “There are as many reasons for running as there are days in the year, years in my life. But mostly I run because I am an animal and a child, an artist and a saint.” So are we all, if we can find “a self-renewing compulsion to call [our] own.”

Learning about who I am as an individual lets me relate more fully to other individuals and to fulfill my role as wife, friend, sister, and daughter. Staring down the prospect of a two-hour trail run teaches me a lot about myself: How will I handle the prospect of something I am not sure I can complete? How will I perform under adverse conditions when things physical or environmental do not go my way? What is my pain threshold, and how will I react when I get there?

Competitive running brings its own set of mental, emotional, and psychological challenges. One of the best long-distance runners who ever lived, Steve Prefontaine, had real insight when he said “most people run a race to see who is fastest. I run a race to see who has the most guts.”

Training for track or cross country gives a window to our character, or the lack thereof. We discover how far we can, or will, push ourselves. We quickly find out whether we have the courage to exert maximum effort on that last repeat, or if we will let ourselves peter out five feet in front of the line. We learn whether we will run that ten-minute effort, or do nine minutes of it and call it enough.

UCLA coaching legend John Wooden is only half right when he says that sports do not *develop* character, they *reveal* it. I have found that strength of character can be molded on the sweltering afternoons, winding trails, and muddy inclines that make up a cross country season.

I did not deliberately choose to become a long-distance runner (for, as my dad used to say, most people do not chose to run distances if they can do some other sport – any other sport – better). But gradually it has become a part of my daily life, and I have become a better person because of it.

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**Running offers the joy of using the body as part of an abundant life. Yet only part, maybe even the lesser part, of long-distance running is physical.**

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The concern about incorrect prioritization of athletic goals, expressed to Eric Liddell by his sister, is a valid one. We are all familiar with athletes,

especially endurance athletes and triathletes, who obsess about their chosen sport. Their undue focus on training, nutrition, and racing may alienate them from others, making it difficult for them to form or maintain meaningful relationships.

There is a distinct line between enjoying a lifetime of activity and obsessively overtraining to achieve superfluous goals (or, we might add, sedentarily agonizing about the batting average of a particular icon while sitting in front of the TV at home). Either of the latter obsessions is a form of idolatry—a substitute for God used to pursue, develop, and affirm self-worth—which can never honor the Lord. But just as God takes pleasure in His creation—in eagles soaring, in lions roaring, in bees buzzing—He takes pleasure in athletes performing.

Steve Prefontaine said that to give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift. I think Eric Liddell would agree.

But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and be not weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

*Isaiah 40:31*

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