

A PERSONAL PEDESTRIAN HISTORY

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The fabric of community

I can't remember what sneakers I was wearing the first day my middle school gym teacher told us we were going to go outside and run cross country. But I know without remembering what clothes I was wearing that day, since they were the same gym clothes we wore in every gym class in the early 1970s—coarse white cotton shorts, a white cotton T-shirt, calf-length “sanitary” (white with accent stripes on top) socks. Probably, the sneakers were basketball sneakers, most likely Converse Chuck Taylors, pretty much what we all wore before the initial prototypes of what would become Air Jordans became the rage. Our first cross-country run—I was in sixth grade—was a lap around the back parking lot, half way up a hill we called “Agony” in high school, then a long gradual downhill through parking lots around the school, around a paved path circling a practice football field, and then back around the same parking lot where we began—about three quarters of a mile. This was the first time I had ever run “long distance.” I was surprised to find I was pretty good at it, or perhaps other boys my age were much less good at it. But in those running clothes—that white cotton uniform, the standard issue jock sneakers—I began to run, away from my family, from my hometown, and from who I might have been had I stayed.

Today, when I go out to run, everything has changed. The socks, shirts, and shorts are high-tech fabrics, silky, moisture wicking, free of the binding and chafing that used to let us know we were doing something hard. These days, running shoes are engineered for all manner of human variations and biomechanical quirks—no more one-size-fits-none. But the changes are not just in what I wear. Running has changed. Selling sporting goods has changed. Making clothes and sneakers has changed. I can hardly explore all these changes in this short essay, but

I do want to try to make sense of the way these changes have played out in my life because this story of a running life and clothes is a Pennsylvania story.

When I first tried cross country running in sixth grade, I was only a few months into my first year of school in Pottsville, the city of a little under 20,000 whose school district my town, Port Carbon, population 3,000, was a part of. Through fifth grade, I had attended the same Port Carbon elementary school my parents had gone to, and played baseball and basketball in Port Carbon leagues with other kids from town. In sixth grade, though I continued playing those sports, I met kids from the larger district, developed some of my first serious crushes on girls from Pottsville, and began to see new possibilities for myself as a student and an athlete. When I discovered running... and in the most unlikely place—gym class...right alongside gymnastics (at which my weak-limbed body seriously sucked), swimming (I couldn't swim and hated it besides), and basketball (I could shoot, but didn't much like roughing it up under the basket).

Running snuck up on me slowly. I joined the youth track team in eighth grade, running distance events after school and playing teenager league baseball at the same time. That first season of track, I ran for the Rockets. Our orange uniforms were some kind of coarse synthetic material on top and lightweight nylon shorts. These team-issue running togs came with a once-fleecy, shrunken cotton sweat suit, pretty much what track athletes wore in the 1970s when they weren't braving the elements in short pants and tank tops. I think I bought a pair of canvas running shoes for that track season, but I can't remember much about them. The track was cinder, as almost all around that part of Pennsylvania were at that time, and so track spikes replaced the shoes.

Encouraged to try out for cross-country by an older runner, Brian Tonitis, who had played baseball with me in Port Carbon, I showed up for twice-a-day captain's practices in August. These pre-season practices took me into the heart of the running subculture at the high school. Early mornings, driving to practice in David Baxter's tan boat of a car—always slow cruise speed, never fast—we were bare-legged-slender, sprawled across the seats in what was left of the nighttime cool. Stretching on the stadium grass, we would linger to avoid beginning our runs into the steadily increasing heat. But as we pulled on early morning legs and talked through the grunts, I soaked in the entire body culture of running—the skinny bodies, the shoes, the clothes, the balms and oils for sore muscles. My sense of social identity at school melded with a new kind of cultural interest—for me, running was what music or drugs became for others...a fascination, a connection with other guys, and maybe most important, a way out of the football jock culture we runners thought dominated Pottsville Area High School in the 1970s. (I'm not sure we were wrong, but we were definitely biased.)

From the runners on the team I found out about local sporting goods stores like Huff's, a little hole-in-the-wall of a place a half floor down from street level in downtown Pottsville. There, Huff presided, and his name suited the atmosphere, which was filled with cigar smell and a gruff, aggrieved, customer-non-service made worse by the store's reliance on the man himself fetching down every item from its nook or cranny. It was at Huff's I was first introduced to modern running shoes—Tiger Onitsuka Pintos—and at first thought they seemed flimsy. Of course, that was the point...minimal weight, just enough to glide on, nylon not canvas. Shoes like Tiger Pintos helped to initiate me into the aesthetics of function I underwent as part of the cross-country team.

Port Carbon was a town centered on its one industry, cloth processing. During my childhood, my dad had worked at the John L. Miller Bleach and Dye plant in town and coached the Carbon Textile little league team on which I played. The little league field at John L. Miller playground sat just across a branch of the upper Schuylkill River from the plant so that my baseball childhood smelled of the factory's chemicals and was colored by memories of how the creek's changing tints responded to the out-flow pipes' waste. Though the factory's business involved cloth processing and not garment making, cotton and its blends were the staple cloths I knew from my dad's work and the occasional scraps or samples he'd sneak home for my occasional school projects or for household rags. Cotton cloth was what supported my family, along with my mom's beauty shop. While my new running clothes were part of a cultural and aesthetic expansion of view, they were also a turn from the cloth I grew up with.

Geek targets

Part of what most interested me about the society of runners and what we wore to signal our participation in it was the way we troubled masculine dress and behavior by what we wore and how we acted. In the 1970s it was still possible for young men wearing flimsy nylon short shorts to get a rise out of everyday Pennsylvania citizens, and certainly to raise the eyebrows of former military men who coached the football team. Our body types were vaguely effeminate—slim, even willowy—and rather than steel gray or white shorts and T-shirts, we could be seen running along road sides wearing bright yellow (one of my first pairs of nylon running shorts), crimson (sure, the school color, but out on the roads?), and bright blue. It was almost as if we *wanted* to be noticed...and of course we did. It wasn't only the clothes, of course, but also the publicness of our claiming space for our sweating skinny bodies on local roads. Athletes were the guys who sweated in the dark weight room off the sour smelling football locker room, in the gym, or under the lights in the stadium. But we were out where anybody could see us, sweating, straining, and making a spectacle of ourselves in ways that suggested we wanted attention. And I suppose we did, though I think we only vaguely had a sense that what we were up to in our sport somehow was outside expectations for us as young men. (This was, I should mention, only at the beginning of women even considering participating in road running in the region where I grew up. I ran with a few young women who risked participating in the sport, and they depended on male friends and their own vigilance to make it even conceivable to run off the stadium track.)

When we ran the roads, we could count on regular heckling and, since we were adversarial sorts, confrontations with young and old men in beaten up cars and trucks. The most benign encounters featured inspired taunts such as, "Hup, two, three, four" and "Run, run, run." We should have ignored these, but we often flipped the bird or otherwise risked escalation. But not all our confrontations were relatively harmless. Just by running around in bright colored skimpy clothes in the 1970s, we could expect to have drivers play chicken with us, swerving across lanes of traffic towards us just to see if we'd jump into the wild brush off the side of the road. Or cars full of guys would stop to block our paths and mutter threats to "Beat the s**t out of us." And since we were, after all, not pacifist philosophers but young men raised to express the same testosterone fueled rage, albeit in our countercultural, fashion-eccentric ways, we threw rocks, gave back as vile obscenities as we got, and taunted grizzled tough guys to "get out of that truck and let's see how tough you are" believing that outside their V-8s none of these knuckleheads stood a chance of catching us. My friend Brian, I recall, once flipped the bird to the wrong pickup truck and found himself pursued along a railroad access path for nearly a half mile until, to get away, he had to wade across a widening portion of the Schuylkill River to ditch them. So, when I say we were challenging codes of masculine

behavior by wearing our skimpy shorts on the roads, there was real risk involved. Fortunately, I never knew anyone who actually ended up in the hospital...except for me... but that's another story.

At around the same time we were bringing fluorescent-colored clothes to public pedestrianism in Schuylkill County, Frank Shorter was redefining distance running for Americans through winning the marathon gold medal in the 1972 Munich and silver in the 1976 Montreal Olympics (though gold winner Waldemar Cierpinski of East Germany is now understood to have used anabolic steroids to achieve his Montreal victory). If the populace of my region of Pennsylvania had not yet taken much notice of the emerging running boom, we runners had. We shared information on our finds: Dolfin running singlets and running shorts and the Womelsdorf running shoe shop that became a Mecca of sorts for local runners. Though we were still sent to local sporting goods stores for school subsidized athletic products, their stock lagged behind our knowledge about the latest clothes and shoes and so were sources of contention. Some among my friends, like Brian, scoffed at the heavy, ill-fitting products the school would offer us as standard issue. Why would someone wear coarse cotton shorts on a six-mile run when the chafing produced would make you sore for a week or more afterward? And why wear those poorly designed Converse "bobos" to run when a pair of Onitsuka nylons made you feel fast, light, and nearly unbeatable? On the other hand, David Baxter was a contrarian, sometimes wearing the "uniform" shirts and shorts just to prove it didn't matter, while at the same time preferring good shoes to bad. It was a matter of what really mattered to running fast for Baxter, and his functionalist aesthetic earned him a certain respect. Though we were living amidst coaches and families who had no clue, our own particular youth culture made us our own experts, even if in school we were pretty much treated like the goofball teens we usually were.

Being set apart from local culture as a runner profoundly affected how I saw myself not just in terms of sports but in terms of my intellectual future. Like others my age, I also defined my tastes through choosing music, reading books, and watching movies that weren't what others chose. But running's adversarial stance was the beginning of these other oppositions in part, I think, because it was through running I gained the support of mentoring young men. Running pulled me away from my father's influence—he had been my baseball and basketball coach—and suddenly I found myself listening more closely to the experienced runners than to coaches, since the runners were way ahead of these adults in terms of their knowledge of the sport. I understood pretty quickly, as I suppose teenagers in all kinds of fields do, that adults' knowledge is often five or more years outdated and if one's peers are really committed to cultural knowledge, their ideas are much better indicators of what is currently important, innovative, and worth adopting. From running, I learned to choose what I read based on what peers mentioned, what I read on my own, and where my curiosity led me. I learned to

read about music and movies in order to find out how to think about what might interest me. Running culture taught me to raise intellectual questions and make my own decisions. No wonder people in pickup trucks wanted to run me off the road.

So it shouldn't have been a surprise that the college that made the most sense to me was not Penn State, not even Frank Shorter's Yale, but rather Spiro Agnew's "Kremlin on the Krum," Swarthmore College. I knew little about Swarthmore when I applied—it was outside Philadelphia, it was Quaker, and it was small. But I knew how it felt to be there on a visit, when my host student let me into his room, encouraged me to make use of whatever I needed, and then told me he was heading back to the library. The quiet loneliness I felt on that visit somehow spoke to me, no doubt because I was a long-distance runner. So I knew I should go to Swarthmore and nowhere else, but I didn't know at the time the school had a great running tradition in the not-too-distant past under Coach Joe Stefanowicz. When I arrived as a freshman I joined a group of upper-classmen and a pair of freshman, Steve Daniels and John Blankfield, who together set about trying to reclaim some of the program's late-1960s/early-1970s glory. We never did have great success as a team, but we were devoted to the sport as only smart guys with NCAA Division III running talent can be. Coach Joe was a great mentor, sort of an über senior on the team who shared his knowledge about running shoes and took us to visit Bill Battey's, a sporting goods store whose shoe selections made us salivate. We'd actually run the two or so miles to Battey's store in Media, try on and maybe even buy shoes, then run back carrying or wearing our new shoes. Between my high school years and college, the running shoe marketing boom had begun, and innovations in design were a monthly feature in *Runners World* or Swarthmore alum Ed Ayres' *Running Times*.

Nike waffles, a shoe style whose prototypes featured soles pressed famously with a waffle iron by legendary Oregon coach Bill Bowerman for his star Steve Prefontaine, represented the hottest among a series of creative approaches to shoe design. But what most strikes me when I look back at that time was how important innovation was to our thinking about ourselves as athletes. I still remember long, late-night arguments about training technique—how fast should intervals be run, was long slow distance really a way to get strong and fast, should we race in our training shoes or train in our racing shoes? We were restless thinkers as athletes, but I don't think we were unique because the mid-seventies boom produced a kind of intellectual curiosity about running performance that was probably a logical offshoot of the cultural production that was the era's pedestrian marketing and publishing. We read about running. We talked about running. And for the most part the centrality of conflict with the "straight" athletic world diminished as local road races became more common and runners on the streets came to seem less outré. Running around Swarthmore and the nearby suburbs, I felt less worried about being confronted, challenged, and

assaulted. In fact, there was often a kind of respect that came from non-runners, shouts of encouragement, or an impressed shake of the head as if to say, "God bless you. I couldn't put myself through that."

Then, one day I was on my way back to campus from an eight-mile run with a friend. We had just crossed a busy road, and he had moved a few steps ahead of me on the sidewalk when I was stunned and the breath knocked out of me. I stopped gasping, having no idea what had happened, and my friend Rich kept going. In a few seconds I collapsed, and Rich ran back and, seeing me suddenly felled thought I had been shot, though there was no blood. He banged on the nearest door, demanding they call an ambulance. Only when I came to did we piece together I had been hit with a water balloon—my soaking wet sweatshirt tipped us off—tossed by some teenagers from a car moving 40 or 45 miles per hour. At that speed, a filled water balloon becomes a dangerous projectile, something about which the no-doubt physics-challenged teen non-pedestrians had little clue. The ambulance arrived and took me straight to Riddle Memorial Hospital, where an EKG and x-rays discovered nothing seriously wrong. But a runner's irregular heartbeat kept me in intensive care overnight for observation. Apparently broad cultural acceptance does not eliminate a runner's vulnerability to random violence. A geek target is still a target.

Back to the future

So what has happened to running and its shoes and clothing since the late 1970s? Now, road races, far from being a kind of cultural transformation of pedestrian reality are a predictable regularity throughout country—they advertise corporate identity, raise money for charities, and provide participants with predictable experiences from the "runners' expo" and pre-race pasta meal on through to the managed ad hoc transportation systems that make their massive scale possible. Running clubs have regularized training for long-distance races to such an extent they can move any willing citizen through the steps necessary to reach their personal race target, all the while finding in the social relations among fellow runners a new style of bond that, in my recent experience, has more in common with workplace "team" relationships than did the idiosyncratic clusters of contentious true believers we were in the 1970s. (I have never heard members of a running club have a real argument about the relative merits of one or the other training regimen.) Certainly, to adopt the stance of iconoclastic outsider as a runner today can only be a matter of personal preference.

Clothes, too, have changed. When I open my drawer of running shirts and shorts now, I see a palette of bright but masculine colors, carefully engineered from hi-tech fabrics to eliminate chafing, wick sweat away from my body, and, in general, allow me to exercise vigorously without the surface discomforts we used to think of as an essential part of exercise. The cotton shirts, shorts, socks, and sweatpants of my textile-industry youth are gone, but so, too, are the bright geek flag colors and unflattering cuts

for skinny bodies. Now Cool-Max polyester, soft as cotton to the hand, rules, with only the occasional silky or lycra touch to let only the wearer feel there's still something a little odd about our exercising bodies. (Only a small portion of the running clothes in my dresser drawers were made outside the United States.) Today's runners like their clothes' queerness a little less obvious.

Now, too, runners' bodies aren't the skinny spectacles whose very visibility taunted football and basketball players in the 1970s. We want our muscle groups to have targeted workouts, so in a sense it's not surprising more people than ever "run" on treadmills in climate controlled athletic clubs where they can also add a little work on their abs and their upper bodies. In fact, pure runners—athletes who obsessively do nothing but run—are rare since cross training has become the norm. (We runners used to think of our pathetically scrawny arms as evidence of our oppositional bodily priorities.) The health club has added benefits, of course: we avoid conflict with pickup-truck-driving or water-balloon-throwing aggressors. At the club, our only conflict is with the fellow customer who overstays their allotted time on the aerobic machine we signed up for in advance.

Shoes, perhaps, have undergone the most pervasive transformation. After the period of wide innovation and brand proliferation in the late seventies and early eighties, running shoe manufacturing settled into the creation of regularized "lines" of products. Different manufacturers developed their unique styles—different last shapes, toe box sizes, emphasis on types of biomechanics. Shoes continue to be manufactured both in the United States and abroad for United States companies, with Nike being the most celebrated example of a major manufacturer depending on low-wage workers abroad to buoy its shareholders' profits. The running shoe sales business transformed gradually from a subtle craft negotiated between running geek store workers and their customers to a pseudo-science in which customers profile themselves through selecting a series of variables (pronator, medium weight, heel striker, etc.) so they can identify the shoes engineered just for them. With the products, consumers, and sales process thus reengineered, the online shoe sales industry now dwarfs the local running store industry.

The shoes themselves have little of the idiosyncratic style of those I wore in the 1970s and early 80s.¹ Mainstream running shoes today are heavily structured to work with and against the runner's biomechanics. Compared to those early shoes, today's are much bulkier, designed to intervene between runner and running surface, though they are not correspondingly heavier. In recent years, in fact, Nike has created a line of shoes called the Nike Free, a flexible, lightweight shoe that, though it uses fairly advanced materials, has more in common with the minimalist qualities of early 1970s shoes. But Nike has advertised and marketed the shoe not as a regular running shoe, but as a specialty shoe that "calls on the foot to do more of the work in cushioning the impact and propelling

the body forward, providing a workout that regular training shoes don't" ("Nike Free 5.0 Running Shoe" 2008). Sounds more or less like what a running shoe is supposed to do, right? But Nike has included disclaimers on these shoes: "While not an everyday trainer, this shoe will work for many people on short, easy runs" ("Nike Free" 2008). Running shoe ad copy is now apparently written by corporate lawyers.

Refashioning running

Over the past few years, motivated by a few years of knee pain I believed was made worse by contemporary running shoes and their constraints on my running motion, I have run in the Nike Free, in some of the lightest weight training shoes made by the Asics company (the current manifestation of the Onitsuka company from my youth), and in "classic" Asics/Onitsuka shoes now marketed—no doubt due to the advice of lawyers—mainly for casual wear. Though I am a number of years older than I was when I last ran regularly, my new shoe regiment has made knee pain no longer a problem. Though aging has inevitably slowed my running, the experience of exercising in less protective shoes reminds me of what running used to feel like when the runner did "more of the work in cushioning the impact and propelling the body forward."

But running is not the same at all in other ways. I used to especially enjoy the adrenaline rush of running alongside traffic on busy roads; no more. While it's sometimes impossible in car dependent central Pennsylvania to avoid using public roads as part of a run, I spend most of my running time off road on trails, cutting across fields, or using dirt roads in the woods. I trust hunters more than I trust cell-phone using SUV drivers. And yet, the verbal and physical aggression that was a regular part of running's social landscape in my youth is all but nonexistent now. I can't remember the last time anyone over eight years of age even remarked on my running in public. I suppose if I were to put on my bright magenta running tights and wear them on local roads, I could rouse some interest, but I hardly run often enough these days to need to wear that particular pair. And I'm too old to solicit conflict to make running interesting these days.

But putting on a pair of thin soled shoes and heading off into the open fields, up and down the rolling hills, on trails, roads, and fields, at my age still connects me to the inherent resistance of running. A body straining against its environment, stride after stride pushing off and being pulled back. Lungs, heart, and muscles resisting stubborn willfulness...just another five minutes, one more time around the block, just up and down one more hill. We used to get carried away with running as resistance, turning a sport that's about balancing resisting forces into one that was about conflict. But when I see the re-engineering running has undergone, I want to recapture something lost. The resistance of running used to be less like the finely calibrated weights in a gym or counterweights in a piece of aerobic equipment than it was a kind of wild counterforce—from weather, bodily strain, human aggres-

sors, or unpredictable traffic conditions. The reassuring part was we found we could deal with circumstances we hadn't anticipated

Today, I feel more protected, less threatened, more integrated into normal masculine physicality in the way I run. But part of me holds onto the feeling that running can stir things up, provoke some kind of response, throw off the enforced balance of things. Now I understand better magenta tights aren't a bad idea when you run in the woods where the hunters are.

ENDNOTES

1. Nike, a giant that has long since transcended its lightweight, running-founded corporate identity, now manufactures a line of "Vintage" running shoes that are built in the forms of its early 1980s shoes and even distressed to look like they were made in the heyday of running shoe innovation. The company typically does not market these shoes as running shoes, but rather as "style" shoes for casual wear.

WORKS CITED

- "Nike Free 5.0 Running Shoe," n.d., <http://www.nike.com/nikefree/usa/index.jhtml?ref=http://www.nike.com/nikefree> (25 March 2008).

A pedestrian is a person travelling on foot, whether walking or running. In modern times, the term usually refers to someone walking on a road or pavement, but this was not the case historically. The meaning of pedestrian is displayed with the morphemes ped- ('foot') and -ian ('characteristic of'). This word is derived from the Latin term pedester ('going on foot') and was first used (in English language) during the 18th century. It was originally used, and can still be used today, as an adjective Ray Bradbury: Short Stories study guide contains a biography of Ray Bradbury, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis of select short stories. The year is 2053, and Mr. Mead is the only pedestrian near his home. He has never seen another person out walking during the many hours that he has strolled. He lives by himself - he has no wife, and so it is a tradition for him to walk every evening. It is never said explicitly in the story, but it can be understood that he is the only, or one of the only, walker in society. On this particular evening, a police car stops him and orders him to put his hands up. He answers a series of questions about his life and family, and his answers are unsatisfactory to the police.

