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The Perfect Run
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The perfect run. For some runners it is like the Holy Grail. Others have never given it a thought. Yet every runner knows what it would be like.

It is an important race. You have trained hard for this day, and luckily slept well the night before. You set off with the leaders at a good pace, feeling easy. At the halfway mark the time is fast -- and you are still gliding. Because you feel so good you decide to push for all you are worth: you come round the last bend knowing you have given everything, shoulder to shoulder with your main rival. Somehow, miraculously, a surge of energy sweeps through you. The pace quickens. Your rival responds bravely, but, with just a few strides to the finish is forced to let go and settle for second place. You are sure you have set a new personal best, but even so are surprised by the margin when you hear the official time.

Well, we can all dream. But could it actually happen? Every runner knows there is a perfect run bottled up inside awaiting the day when everything 'clicks' and goes right simultaneously. Every runner knows that, so far, he has never quite fulfilled his potential -- that even in his very best efforts there has always been a perceptible slackening of pace at some point, a momentary lapse of concentration, in short, an imperfection. He knows too that even when he ran well there was always just a little left in reserve -- that he could have taken a couple of seconds off his time or finished one place higher up the field. And, I believe, we all hope in our hearts that the time will come when that last missing piece slots neatly into place and we achieve our lull potential.

But of course it never will. Why not? Because the whole exciting, tantalising concept of the perfect run is a paradox, a double paradox in fact, founded on two contradictions at the root of athletics which have profound implications in other walks of life. For the perfect run is an ideal. It is a myth of the future rather than the past, and not only, like a myth or legend, is it based on events that never took place, **it must never be allowed to happen**. This is the foundation of the first paradox: the perfect run is not merely unattainable for practical reasons; it is positively forbidden for moral ones, since if such a thing were admitted to have occurred the whole idea (and idealism) behind running would lose its meaning. The essence of athletic idealism is a striving towards improvement. This is a driving force no less for the many whose objective is the five-minute mile or the five-foot high jump than for the few to whom the prize is a world record or Olympic medal, and it finds appropriate expression in the Olympic motto 'Citius, Altius, Fortius' ... faster, higher, stronger.

The whole point of world (or personal) records is that they can be beaten. Imagine the consternation produced, say, by a three-minute mile, most especially among the elite who were training with 3:48 in mind; and imagine what would happen if we knew as a matter of scientific fact that athletic achievements had reached some biologically determined peak and that the runners of today and tomorrow could never outstrip those of the past. From that moment we could confidently predict that athletics would be a declining, not to say dying, sport -- for its forward momentum would have been checked.

Take for example the nearest we have to an ultimate world record, Bob Beamon's outstanding leap of 8.90 metres in Mexico 1968. It has not stopped people attempting the long jump, but it has taken some of the sparkle from the event, and it cast a pall over the competition as soon as it took place.

The other jumpers lost the urge to compete; and most recorded substandard performances. The effect on Beamon himself was most dramatic: he realised that he could not surpass that moment of glory and never again jumped in international class. His career was cut short by success.

So, bearing this in mind, we should not be too ready to condemn athletes who are 'over the hill'. It is indeed sad and painful to watch a great boxer like Sugar Ray Robinson at forty being punished by someone he could have floored in his prime; it is disappointing to see a champion like Emil Zatopek labouring wearily to sixth place in the Olympic Marathon of 1956 when four years earlier he was supreme; but it might be even more depressing if athletes with such spirit and courage were to give up, call it a day, and admit that the best was all over, without a fight.

The second contradiction inherent in the idea of the perfect run (or jump or throw or goal or whatever) is that it must be easy and at the same time it must be hard. In a way this is even more significant, because it leads outside athletics.

Most experienced runners will agree, I think, that when they run well it feels good. On a bad day you struggle, you push, you sweat, and you lose: on a good day you coast, you fly, you float, and you win. The really good run is over far too quickly to let you notice a little detail like fatigue, while the bad one drags on and on to exhaustion. And yet to achieve a perfect run the runner must not only feel fine and move smoothly and swiftly, he must know he has given every ounce of available energy and withheld nothing. It sounds paradoxical enough, but it is in fact the secret of the greatest exponents in every sport -- complete relaxation and unstinting effort combined at the same time.

This has wider application than the pursuit of running, or indeed athletics as a whole. It applies in many fields outside sport: the great surgeon, the consummate actor, the master singer and the skilled craftsman all make their expertise seem so easy. All can concentrate absolutely on the task in hand while remaining utterly relaxed. This is not so much a paradox as a mystery. It is part of the mystery of the human spirit; and it is certainly something to be glad about.

So let us return with a new viewpoint to that 'perfect run', and ask ourselves some questions. Does it really have to be an important race, or a race at all? Do you really have to win? Must it be a personal best? Need it be timed or measured at all? Would it not be closer to the spirit of the thing if we were to re-cast it in an entirely different mould?

It is an ordinary rainy-day jog. You have not been training much recently and slept badly the previous night. A bunch of you set off together but you soon drift towards the back, still not feeling comfortable. Because you are getting tired you ease up some more, and as you come within sight of the finish another jogger goes past. Then, almost miraculously, a flash of insight changes it all. Suddenly you are enjoying it: you are alive and you are free; your limbs belong to you and your body is full of health. You cross the line not knowing how far you ran or how long it took, but certain that you want to do it again.

Surely, a perfect run can happen every day.

[Note added in 2018: Yes, in 1977 there were plenty of female runners, but writing 'he' & 'his' wasn't generally seen as demeaning to more than half the human race. Using masculine pronouns to refer to both sexes wouldn't get past an editor these days even if I were disposed to use them in that mode. So I did think of hiding my former self's lack of feminist credentials by producing an androgynous version ("master singer"? "craftsman"?). However, that seemed deceptive, so I have decided to reproduce the text as it appeared rather than silently emend it.]