The Old New Lore of Running

The whole Pheidippides thing doesn't bother me. I know that the highly-embellished tale became modern mythology in the wake of a 1970s running boom and that it stands as a subculture artifact preached at the Church of the Sunday Morning Run. But something else is at stake. Perhaps it's because Old Phip died, theatrically, on the steps of Athens' newest health club.

And no one can find his grave to make a Nike ad over it.

Regardless of how sophisticated or institutionalized sport in America has become, there will always be those who wonder how water polo players are able to teach their horses to swim. Those who consider Lou Gehrig to be the first Ironman, believe in the Loch Ness Monster, Sasquatch and are sure that Babe Ruth was named after the candy bar are a large but empathetic lot.

Somehow though, we must embrace myth, if not codified truth, and be subjected to all that comes with a belief in something that lies smack between the secular and the sacred, the fiction and the fabricated. Not quite truth and not quite fable, it makes the camp fire stories go down smooth and possibilities more possible.

Many are the stories told about the origins of the marathon--Pheidippides sent to Sparta to request help when the Persians landed at Marathon, Greece. Folklore has him running 150 miles in two days and then the iconic 26 all the way to Athens to announce the Greek victory over Persia in 490 B.C. Forget that the historian, Herodotus would suggest otherwise, that the event was simply a fabricated conflation used by Baron Pierre de Coubertin to help anchor a significant event at the (new) modern Olympics in 1896. Even back then horses were faster than men. And cheaper. But the image of Old Phip collapsing dead upon his announcement makes for great TV.

It's a relativistic argument—who cares if it's bullshit---lots of people have been inspired to run by the fabricated Greek myth. Ends justify the means. Lie all you want so long as it gets people into running shoes and out the door. We tend to swallow the muchness of modern hyperbole, fully knowledgeable that its reconstitution is carefully avoided when seen in small piles on streets and fields alike.

I used to hear these stories of triathlon great, Scott Molina, running one hundred miles a week, about Ironman winner, Tom Warren, riding his

bike in the sauna, about Dave Scott rinsing the cream out of his low fat cottage cheese (Actually, these are poor examples of myth because they're more true than untrue). But the fact that I invested emotion and altered training regimes on the backs of their truism supports their viability. In my own projected belief lay their reality and their affect on my actions.

Myth emanates from our need to have guiding examples for our own mortal lives, to help us develop meaning out of our existence. Maybe Tommy Warren only rode his stationary bike in the sauna a few times in some excessive, pre-Ironman training ritual. But the image of him sitting there, 112 degree heat, a pool of sweat running out under the door, minutes and then hours passing—the truth of if becomes irrelevant because the myth of it has taken hold of us and done conscionable things to our psyche. Warren's purported exploits have now become some kind of underground guide posts to inform and affect our own decisions if not delusions. He is a hero, he is a nutcase, he is just like us and we may never be too unlike him. The truth of the myth becomes truer than the reality of the occurrence. Tom's own reality is propped up by his 1979 Hawaiian Ironman victory even though his time then would not place him in the top five of the women's 50-55 age group today.

Myth and sport have shared each other's affect on our lives since long before ancient Greece and is inclusive of Beijing's own recent narratives, shaping our stories and how they speak to us as athletes and layman alike. We can only imagine what it may be to run-like-a-Kenyon but if we can somehow roll the film in our minds while plodding along at one half their pace, images looped and faces duped, we can get closer to a 2:06 marathon than even Herodotus could chronicle. Imagine, we tell ourselves through mental myth…and we do.

With myth comes hope. And with hope comes belief. The most sophomoric of sport psychologists know that if you can't believe it, you can't imagine it. And it you can't imagine it, well…it just ain't gonna' happen. But is that to say that superior sport performance must begin with some substantive historical act? Do we half to re-live Sir Roger Bannister's epic four-minute mile before we can hope/believe/imagine and perform an 8 minute four-lapper? Maybe.

What about all those alternative, extreme sport kids who fly skateboards like video game icons or flip motorcycles as you might a hand held flashlight on a drunken trampoline game? Is their superior performance

catalyzed in some pre-modern narrative unearthed from a dusty text at a university library? Or did they simply dream it up and then pull it off? Youth sport culture of late is doing things the previous generation wouldn't dare imagine. Their specific myth can be traced all the way back to…like, 1990. They had what Bannister had---imagination. Few others considered the 4 minute mile barrier conquerable except Bannister and his mighty band of Oxford University cohorts. Few people thought a motorcycle could be flipped not once but twice. And then ridden away with rider intact.

Is it more than imagination and myth that drives the modern Pheidippides to run themselves to figurative death? Or something else such as the external rewards of fame, fortune and fifty percent off? Motive has always been a moveable feast of ideas and what ifs and if onlys. I suppose it will always be that way.

When Tom Warren went to Oahu in 1979 to compete in the 2nd Ironman Triathlon, the only race-specific myth that he had been exposed to was a short hand-written note from the race organizer responding to his request for information. "Come on over, Tom," he quipped. "It's a tough race but I think it will stick to you somehow." But he could imagine that it might.

And what else stuck was the organic development of the event. Without corporate sponsors or a well-paying TV contract, the Ironman grew like the marathon run did—over time, through oral history passed down by those who had been party to event and were affected by it. And with it grew the lore of its participants.

There are running races that come out of the box pre-packaged with more entertainment than a Las Vegas show. And they are successful because they fill a demand for something that the act of running lacks—diversion. Runners like to be distracted from the tedium, the pain and perhaps the boredom of the process. This is natural and completely acceptable. Somewhere though, in the rents and seems of that runner's mind lies a historicity, a complex relation to every runner and every race that came before. No different than serious rock and rollers (enter name or group here) are byproducts of the Beatles who learned from Buddy Holly who was begat by Robert Johnson who was influenced by African spiritualist. If you want to find the original runner, better to look in the Old Testament than Runner's World.

From the cotton fields to the Coliseum, no artist or athlete can deny their history. Bannister himself, in a fiftieth anniversary addendum to his landmark text, "The Four Minute Mile," claimed that, "I now understand more about the sources of pleasure and pain and the strange, some say

mystical, experiences that come to those who extend their physical powers to the limit." At nearly eighty years, Sir Roger must have negotiated that chasm world between idealism and practicality, aspirations and reality. Whatever digressions he might have made in his notable quest, they are not disingenuousness. There is universality in his four laps in four minutes. But the same can be said of four times around your block before four beers.

We march to the significance of the drumming story, as Thoreau said, "however measured or far away."

And for Warren, who recently lost his dream home to a wild fire and his life's love to a tragic cycling accident, there is that nobility gained after having inhaled too much of life's ugly truths. "I'm an emotional guy," he said, "and I'm in control of that emotion, turning it off and on like a facet. But I'm an athlete above everything. I have to run and ride and move, move, move. I am…myself, not a story of my past."

Perhaps Banister and Warren are modern myth because they never tried to be, never figured they'd do their thing and end up in the stories of those that came next.

We are a culture besieged by too much data, too many images and messages, most of which are trying to sell us something. Inside the stories of old runners, though, are old wisdom that never gets old. While the narratives get clogged in the seaweed of hype and tattoos that never say what a gutsy run will, over time, the Steve Prefontaines and the Abibi Bikilas and Haile Gebrselassies and the Ron Clarks and the Billy Mills and Mary Deckers and Keinos and Zatopeks…all of them will end up being passed around in plate, the gentle, brilliant banter of the Church of the Sunday Run.

And we will drink it all in.

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