

“What Athletes Carry”

Siri Lindley carries a necklace with tiny, sometimes odd reminders of people and places and good times. The only time she will remove it is when she races. This she does with great hesitancy. Carol Montgomery carries one pair of beige levis on every trip she takes. When they get dirty after a week in Peru or Japan, she rinses them in the sink with the hotel shampoo. Jimmy Riccetello carries two harmonicas, one in C major for the easy folk songs before the race and one in E for the blues if he has not done well.

Some athletes carry extra safety pins, vaseline for the private parts or that cooking spray they use to coat their wetsuits. Others won't go to a race without their favorite CD containing a pre-race 'psyche song'. The smarter ones carry sunscreen and lip balm. The crooks carry the hotel towels home. The well-planned always have aspirin, 5 mm allen wrenches and extra lace locks, all of which are often borrowed and rarely returned. Every endurance athlete I know has a banana, a PowerBar and a water bottle on the seat of their car.

Some carry great dreams in their head, dreams of winning, dreams of taking flight, dreams of finishing before the sun goes down. The dreams seem familiar to the outside listener but unique to the weaver of that personal quest.

Some carry memories like buckets of water from a well, fetched when one is thirsty or in need of a bath. Others carry their memories like a knapsack sewn into the skin of their backs, an extra place to store all that they have experienced, too afraid to put the bad parts in their heads, too smart to let the good times out of their sight and sometimes too stupid to know the difference. But carry them they do, as we all must in whatever place and form makes sense at the time.

A lot of athletes carry guilt. And oddly enough, they carry it proudly, a public display of remorse for missing a workout or failing to place in their age group. “I can't believe I missed that last 2 miles of the 2 hr run. I really suck”, they say. Or, “You? I only swam 20,000 yards last week. I doubt I'll ever get back into shape. Might as well hang it up.”

Yes, we are a subculture of carriers. Be it tangible things, large or small or a pot pourri of emotional baggage, athletes seem to be the Sherpas of the physical world. There is nothing we will not burden ourselves with if we believe that it will make us faster, stronger, or more popular with our peers.

Nothing, it seems, is desposable-- t-shirt drawers that don't close, old cog sets that have five gears, pictures from our first race (and just about every other one since). Some of it is necessary for our safety, like helmets and flashlights and 4 pair of swim goggles. Others run towards the vein of vanity, tight black skirts for the awards ceremonies and fingernail clippers to get the chain grease out from under our finger nails. A lot of what I carry has more to do with my sanity than the event I am traveling to (Ok, let's see, guitar, laptop, 8 books...did I forget anything?).

I often wonder if we carry too much with us. Not the the things you can see and taste and smell and touch but the constant messages in our heads. Did I train hard enough? Too hard? Is so-and-so going to be there today? Is my new training plan correct? Is my girlfriend going to drop me if I fall asleep at 9:00 p.m. again? Are my quads getting too big to be sexy?

I suppose that in some cases we have no choice: we take our material where we find it, which is in our life, at the intersection of past and present. For the athlete that means carrying tired eyes, sunburn noses, race applications and legs that never seem to have much real spring to them anymore.

But it also means carrying the smiles of training partners when they do well, great songs in our heads during a set of 12 x 100 yards, stickers on our bumpers that we are proud of. And plans, always plans for a new running route, a race that sounds "neat", a new bike instead of a new couch. Yes, we are good with the plans that we carry.

If builders were born to take away open space, and artists were put on this earth to create pictures and music and merchants are destined to dwell in a world of commerce, athletes are presupposed to movement. But movement itself connotes the burden of transportation in its passage. It carries with it some innate expectancy that if we are moving, whether it be in the form of dance, jump, running, travel through a foreign medium like water or snow or even with the advantage of mechanical object (bike, car, plane, parachute, boat) then we are to carry something with us.

What if we were to reject that package? What if we were to train and race and plan, even dream, without thought, expectation or outcome; to play like a child, simply for the sake of play itself? To carry nothing but our bodies and our spirit and our soul?

What would the incredible lightness feel like?

