

Ryan R. Shay
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Prof. Leahy
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American Distance Runners: Getting Lapped in the Fast Lane

My goal in life is to become an elite distance runner. I want to indulge in victory and be able to tell myself that I am the best at what I do. With this goal embedded in my thoughts, dreams, attitude, and character I am forced to look back upon United States distance runners and learn from the past. In studying the recent history of distance running, I have noticed that American distance runners have not progressed compared to foreign athletes. Each year world records are being set in distance events. None are being set by Americans. This lead me to analyze distance running in the U.S., and come to a conclusion on why American runners are "getting lapped in the fast lane," and whether or not, as an American, I stand a chance to compete at the world-class level.

There was a time when America male distance runners actually won big races. This was a time when distance runners were not in the awe of the Kenyans or other African runners. A time when a little known runner from the Army won the 10,000 meters (m) run at the 1964 Olympics. This little known runner was Billy Mills. He shocked the world in this event, beating the world record holder Ron Clark of Australia. Then, four days later, American

Bob Schul won the 5,000m with another American, Bill Dellinger, taking the bronze (Bloom 36). There was a time when Americans could run distance, but these are fading Olympic memories. The success did not last long. No American man has won an Olympic medal or World Championship medal in the 10,000m or 5,000m events since.

These days U.S. distance runners face a struggle of being unappreciated and having anonymity. They are overwhelmed by the speed and endurance of Kenyans, Algerians, Ethiopians, and various Europeans. In the 5,000m run the last U.S. medalist were Robert Schul (gold) and Bill Dillinger (bronze) in the 1964 Olympic Games (Track & Field 2). In the 1,500m run there has been no Olympic medal since Jim Ryun's silver in 1968. In the distances from the 1,500m to the marathon, U.S. men have won just two medals since 1972 - a silver by Frank Shorter in the 1976 marathon and a bronze by Brian Diemer in the steeplechase in 1984 (Baum 2).

These facts are enough to discourage many runners from pursuing such a dark, unsure path. Many distance runners feel inferior to African runners. They believe that they have no chance to compete in the future and allow their dreams to wither away. Runners begin to ask themselves why they should put forth the effort necessary to become an elite runner, when they do not stand a chance against their competitors. However, there does

seem to be a light that illuminates the path. This light is America's best hope for a distance medal in the next Olympics, Bob Kennedy. To analyze American runners, one must envision running through the eyes of Bob Kennedy. Kennedy holds the U.S. record for the 5,000m, 3,000m, and the 2 mile. He has proven time and time again that he can compete with African runners and that he possesses the potential to win an Olympic medal.

Kennedy has realized that Americans today are not performing well at the elite level. To allow himself to perform to the best of his abilities, he had decided to train with the masters of distance running. Two years ago during the summer track season, Kennedy trained with the Kenyans. Doing the same workouts that the Kenyans did, buoyed his confidence. While training with the Kenyans, Kennedy noticed many differences between African philosophies and lifestyles toward running and American running philosophies and lifestyles. "One of the reasons we haven't produced many world-class distance runners recently is I don't think Americans train hard enough," says Kennedy (Swift 36). Kennedy's training miles are similar to what many other Americans do, 90 to 95 miles a week. What sets him apart, and this is something that he learned from the Kenyans, is that he will run the miles more intensely and with more aggression than other U.S. runners. After a long hard season, Kennedy takes two months off which is another aspect of African runners.

Case Shay is another American runner who agrees with Kennedy. Shay is the only American on Lubbock Christian University's cross-country team. He has won the 1996 NAIA National Championship in the 3,000m steeplechase and has been part of Lubbock's National Championship cross-country team for the past three years while earning All-American honors. While training with the Africans on his team Shay says, "I believe that I have developed more as a runner coming to Lubbock. The Kenyans demonstrate a work ethic that is not present with many American runners." "One time I asked a Kenyan teammate how many 400m repeats we were going to do and he said 'until we're dead,'" continued Shay. The Kenyans live by a philosophy that says "nilan dika hasara" which briefly means whatever happens, happens; sacrifice and if you fail, you fail. This philosophy is remembered by the Kenyans before every race. They will go out fast in a race and keep the pace this way. "This is the attitude that is different from the most American runners," says Shay. This is the attitude that helped develop Case Shay as a runner. Although there are many problems with American distance running at the elite level, the base of the problem lies at the high school level.

Many things high school runners do, or do not do, has an impact on the future of American Distance running. Most will not strive for excellence and victory. They will not run the extra

miles to become better. Most high school runners barely do what is required by their coaches. Especially for the young, distance running has lost its appeal in the United States. "The base coming out of high school isn't as good as it was twenty years ago," says University of Florida's head Track and Cross-country coach Doug Brown (Baum 1). Doug Brown is also a former Olympian and coach of America's number one 10,000m runner Todd Williams. In general, high school runners are not as willing to lay it on the line. They are not willing to work hard. High school runners today are out there more for the social reasons that to be good runners. To put it more bluntly, the youth of today are basically lazy, and distance running is a lot of hard work. A young runner could have all the talent in the world and nothing to show for it. "In distance running, if you don't work your butt off, talent isn't going to get you anywhere," says Olympian Bob Kennedy about high school runners (Baum 1).

There is a lack of motivation for high school runners. Those who do achieve as high school runners are very disciplined and hard-working individuals. Running in general lacks the prominence that other sports indulge in. Although an athlete such as Bob Kennedy is the best hope for a distance medal in the next Olympics, he is virtually unknown in the United States. Without the popularity, distance runners have to be self motivated. Many high school athletes (including runners) look up

to athletes such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Steve Young, and Ken Griffey Jr., not Bob Kennedy or Todd Williams. High schoolers see the wealth and fame that football, basketball, and baseball players receive, and that is what they aspire to.

If there is one way to motivate a person it is with money. One of the major reasons for the dominance of foreign runners is the financial and social advantages they encounter (Bakoulis 22). Runners from Kenya, Mexico, China, and Europe can gain stardom and financial security from their running status. The track circuit in Europe provides runners the opportunities to make money. "The rewards are such that the gamble to become a successful runner is well worth it. A season in Europe could result in excess of ten years' ordinary wages for African runners," says Coach Piane of the University of Notre Dame who has also trained African runners in Morocco while with the Peace Corps. If a runner has a well known running status he or she may be offered up to \$50,000 as an appearance fee. This does not include any bonuses awarded if the runner wins or sets a world record. In America there are not many opportunities to run competitively and make money. This sounds ironic when America is considered the land of opportunity. Many people do not realize that running is a full time job. Most runners trying to train for the Olympics and compete at an elite level maintain a second job. This creates a problem of juggling both a training schedule

and a work schedule. Instead of bringing home the gold, many runners are forced to bring home the bacon.

The lack of prominent American distance runners in today's society will ultimately lead to the United States being left out of the great triumphs of Olympic history. The Olympic Games create unforgettable historical moments such as Jesse Owens (an African American) winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympic Games. He accomplished this unimaginable task in a stadium Adolf Hitler built to demonstrate Aryan supremacy. Another repercussion if the problem is not solved relates to runners who have the talent and desire to become elite runners. They will have a harder time accomplishing their dreams because of the unsureness of the future of American distance runners. Americans will continue to get embarrassed and have their pride shot in distance events at world class competitions if the problem remains unresolved. Their competitors will stereotype Americans as being lazy and "growing up in a soft society with a McDonald's around every corner." (Bloom 36) These potential problems are why American runners must re-evaluate their current lifestyles, training tactics, and state of mind.

For distance running to undergo salvation many changes need to occur. First, high school runners must realize that to become a world-class runner it is going to take focus, determination, and perseverance. In other words, high school runners will have

to work their butts off and stop being lazy. Young runners cannot allow distractions to enter their lives. "High school runners often come from communities that stress education more than athletics to ensure a career. Therefore, few high school runners have running as their top priority in life," says coach Piane. Once a goal has been set, a runner must adhere to his or her decision.

Secondly, more promotional and commercial sponsorship is needed to support American runners. This necessity must exist not only during the Summer Games, but for each of the years leading up to the festival. Americans excel at the sport which grants an athlete the most money. Americans began to dominate basketball in the Olympics when professional basketball players were allowed to participate. Basketball is one of the highest paying sports in the U.S.

Lastly, those Americans who do compete at the world-class level have to accept the fact that Kenyans and other African runners are just human. They contain no super-physical qualities which enable them to perform better. Many Americans believe that Kenyans are good runners because they had to run 10 miles to school and back while growing up. The truth is, contrary to what Americans believe, is that most elite Kenyan runners attended boarding schools. "I lived two miles from my school and walked with my friends. We saved our running for

training sessions," explains Kenyan runner Sammy Siratie who now runs for Taylor University in Indiana. Americans also stress how training at high altitudes help Kenyans perform better. "People think you just have to be born a Kenyan to be a champion runner!" laughs Mike Kosegi who coaches Kenyan runners. "If it were altitude alone then why are there not a lot of great runners from Nepal or Peru?" (Tanser 80). "Why do we perform so well? It is because of our tough training," says Kenyan runner Moses Kiptanui. He is a three time world champion in the steeple chase a former world record holder in the 5,000m run (ESPN 1). Africans just flat out train harder than Americans. "These myths give Kenyans an advantage before the race even starts. If a runner thinks he will lose to a Kenyan, then he probably will," says Siratie. Once the mental state of a runner is transformed from intimidation by the African runners, to the realization of victory, American runners will succeed in distance running.

Americans must have another running era to encourage all runners to excel and to bring back pride to American running. We need more Jim Ryuns, Billy Mills, and Frank Shorters. It's an embarrassment to our country when we are considered the most powerful nation in the world, but cannot produce world-class distance runners. The level of thinking has to rise for U.S. distance runners. No matter what is accomplished by American distance runners, they have to be constantly asking: what's next?

That's the only way Americans will get better. Whatever is done by American runners has to be done with one 100 percent effort. U.S. distance runners can be great runners if they would run with a total commitment to becoming Olympic champions.

Future American Olympic champions will bring pride back to the United States. The first competition of the Modern Olympic Games in 1896 was won by an American. The American Flag was raised and the Star Spangle Banner played, beginning a tradition of honoring the victor and his or her country. The Ancient Olympic Games began the tradition of Olympic champions being recognized as heros forever. In analyzing American distance running I have learned what I need to establish as a runner, what steps I must take, and what mind set I must have to become an elite runner. I must have the same attitude as did one of America's best distance runners Steve Prefontaine who once said: "I don't run a race to see who is the fastest, but to see who has the most guts." This is what will make Americans great runners. This is what will make them heros for eternity.

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