



GEORGE SHEEHAN'S

VIEWPOINT

MY BODY, MY SELF

Running can help us become all we were meant to be

If runners possess anything to a greater degree than endurance, it is self-esteem. People with self-esteem view their ideal selves and their actual selves as nearly one and the same. And we runners tend to regard ourselves as born-again heroes and saints.

This is a great possession. A recent Gallup Poll studied the effect of self-esteem on the American public. The survey showed that people with strong self-esteem were healthier, happier and more productive than people without it.

I've often been asked how the puny distance runner possesses such self-esteem. After all, is there anyone out there who doesn't have concerns about self-worth? Is there anyone not on a constant search for identity, autonomy and control? Runners are no different from others in those respects, except that we run.

The fact is that running is an ideal way to develop the self. When I became a runner, I became the body I was meant to be—trained, capable and responding to any demands made upon me.

But that's not all. Achieving the capable body leads to a similar search for the capable mind.

In such a search, talent and wealth, beauty and station, learning and lineage count for little. We already possess all we need. It is effort that brings us to greatness—to the fusion of what we are and what we can be.

Our sensibility and imagination have limitations. But our industry need not. It is sufficient to pursue excellence, to be dedicated to something, to give ourselves to some project.

In this pursuit of excellence, we runners do something that upsets some observers. We tend to reset goals. Runners are never satisfied. We are always in process, always trying to reach higher. For me, that is a test for normalcy. The normal person constantly strives for the ideal self.

But some mental-health experts question our method for achieving normalcy. They consider running a destructive obsession, a negative addiction that costs more than the benefits it confers.

To them running is acceptable only when done for physical health or to relieve

stress. It is not acceptable, however, when it is accompanied by the intensity and exclusiveness usually reserved for religious fanaticism. When a runner reaches that point, they think therapeutic measures should be instituted. Runners must be saved from the maladaptive behavior that has taken over their lives and instead concentrate on psychologically acceptable pursuits to work out their salvation.

While I'm sure that some runners become obsessive, I'm more apt to accept the findings of Darren George of California State University at Fullerton. His survey showed that compared to nonrunners, runners were "more reserved, more intelligent, more dominant, more aggressive, more socially reticent, a bit more suspicious, more shrewd, more self-sufficient and more unconventional."

And we have more self-esteem. Running narrows the distance between what we are and what we can be, between the actual self and the ideal, between reality and aspiration.



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