November 1, 2024 / Why everybody's running marathons now

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

MAGGIE MERTENS (freelance journalist and author): While running a marathon, there are people who end up pooping themselves.

SCORING <The Elbows Dance Polka>

MAGGIE: Peeing your pants is definitely something that happens. There's definitely, like, vomiting that happens. People get overheated, dehydrated. You can have foot problems, leg problems, knee problems. Runner's knee is one that I've had friends suffer from, which is pretty – pretty sad. [It] just means you kind of like ran too much and your knee is not happy about it. Nipple chafing! You know, chafing in general. A thigh chafing, arm chafing. I had a really bad, like, armpit chafe after one race. I mean, there's very rare cases of people who have heart attacks while they run marathons…

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Okay. But all that aside, it could be the greatest thing you ever do.

MAGGIE: It could be. I mean, it absolutely could be. It could be something that changes your life, that makes you feel like a rock star. That, like, changes how you view yourself.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Why everyone seems to be running a marathon now –

SCORING OUT

SEAN: – on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> CHICAGO MARATHON 2024 NATSOUND   
 TEx PRODUCER AMANDA LEWELLYN: This is Today, Explained.*

SEAN: It certainly FEELS like everyone is running a marathon. Maggie Mertens just wrote a book about running, so she’s been tracking the numbers and can vouch.

MAGGIE: Way more people are running marathons now. Even just in the last couple of years, you know, from 2022 to 2023, the app Strava, who you know, is used by most runners we know, saw an almost 20% increase of runners running marathons. So just in one year, a 20% increase…

SEAN: Wow.

MAGGIE: … is pretty huge. And, you know, record finishers here at the 2024 Berlin Marathon this year: 54,280 people finished the Berlin Marathon this year.

SEAN: Never before have that many people finished the Berlin Marathon?

MAGGIE: Never before, um, finished any marathon. That was the new world record.

SEAN: Oh!

MAGGIE: They think that New York Marathon, this upcoming weekend, is actually going to beat that record, which is pretty incredible, because, you know, even back in just like the year 2000, there were less than 30,000 finishers in that race.

SEAN: Wow! Okay. Who are the people running these marathons? Because I imagine way back when I was born, it was like *runners*, but now it's like a whole different set. <laughing> I shouldn't say that because, of course, they’re runners!

MAGGIE: Well, I think this is a really important conversation, actually, is like: who is a runner? And I think that definition has really changed, especially in these recent years. You're absolutely right. Like, I'm 37 when I was growing up, you know, my dad ran a couple of marathons and it was like a weird thing to do.

SEAN: Mm.

MAGGIE: <chuckles> It was a weird hobby. We didn't know other people who did it, you know? And now, I mean, I'm sure most of your listeners know more than one person who's run a marathon.

SEAN: Mm-hm.

MAGGIE: That's not to say like, everyone actually is doing this. It is still a really hard thing to do. But the average time to complete a marathon has been going up.

SEAN: Hm.

MAGGIE: So the average finish time is four hours and 32 minutes. That means that more casual runners, newer runners, are looking at this as something to do. It's not just like those who can do it in three hours and under. I do also want to point out, like the reason we're seeing so many more people, especially just in the last 20 years or so, is, you know, marathon running used to be really exclusive. It wasn't just that it was like competitive runners. It was because competitive runners were mostly white men.

SEAN: Mmm.

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL: A record field of 601 starters braved chilly winds and a steady drizzle in the 71st Boston Marathon…*

MAGGIE: And we just really didn't have a lot of access. You know, especially for women, that was not allowed, until the 70s…

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL: …The world’s most famous footrace even attracts a leggy lady, Kay Switzer of Syracuse, who did not finish. Officials tried to jostle her off the road.*

MAGGIE: And even in the year 2000, for every two men who finished a marathon, one woman would. And so now we're finally at parity. So that's a huge demographic, you know, boost of women seeing other women run. You know, that's a generational shift. This also applies to people of color. We're seeing so much more diversity in terms of marathon finishers who are people of color.

*<CLIP> TIFFANY GAYLE CHENAULT, TED TALK: Then I found out there were running groups such as Black Girls Run, Black Girls Rock 50 States, Girls Run, National Black Marathoners Association. It was at that moment when I knew that I was a runner.*

MAGGIE: There's a lot of younger people running. There's also a lot of older people running because more people are kind of continuing to run or picking it up later in life.

SEAN: Hm.

MAGGIE: But this generation of 20-somethings, Gen Z, has really upped the ante just in the last few years, like pre-pandemic to now. You know, these numbers have gone from like 15% of people who finished the New York City Marathon in 2019 were in their 20s. By 2023, that was 19%. So those are pretty big jumps.

SEAN: Hm!

MAGGIE: Um, 28% in L.A. this year were in their 20s, up from 21% in 2019.

SEAN: I want to talk about the young people, because historically, you know, young people out there having a good time, not necessarily spending, like, hours upon hours upon hours of their days and weeks training for a marathon. What are these young people running from?

MAGGIE: Oh, my gosh. Everything! <laughs>

SCORING <Funky Drumbeat>

MAGGIE: I've interviewed a lot of Gen Z runners – marathoners – and a lot of them started running during the pandemic. A lot of them were starting careers at that time, were graduating from college and, you know, maybe didn't have a real graduation, maybe didn't have, you know, these normal adult milestones.

SEAN: Mm.

*<CLIP> PASCALE GEDAY, 26: I think I was kind of, like, in a rut when I first started running. I didn't… at that moment, I remember like I didn't have a job, like I was looking for a job I was trying to apply. It was Covid. It was like all, like, ‘I need to do something to make myself feel better,’ and I was – quarter-life crisis for sure…*

MAGGIE: They see, you know, homeownership and marriage and kids as kind of out of reach – further out of reach than, you know, even I think like the Millennial generation did. That adds up to a lot of uncertainty. And the thing that running a marathon can do is really provide a concrete path that, you know, a lot of young people don't see otherwise.

*<CLIP> TAYLOR-NICOLE LIMAS, 28: I think your day can be absolute trash. You can have the worst day in the world, but the benefit of that is that you turn around and you're like, Well, at least I got my miles in. Or at least I got… I ran the longest distance I could possibly run. And I think that feeling of accomplishment hits those endorphins in your brain to where, at least at the end of the day, you accomplished something.*

MAGGIE: So they have like, ‘okay, I don't really know what I'm doing for work this week because I'm a contractor, but like, I know that I have to run 30 miles, so I'm going to do, you know, eight miles today and 3, 4, 5 the next few days. And I know that that means I'm going to have to, you know, get good sleep and eat well.’

*<CLIP> GEDAY: I'm not proud of it, but I used to vape, so I definitely like let go of that. Like I'm no longer vaping. I feel like it's made me a lot better athlete…*

MAGGIE: And so, you know, it's a lot about how to kind of build an adult life without, you know, some of the more traditional strictures that used to be on there.

*<CLIP> MITCHELL ROSE, 23: It kind of gives me like, you know, almost like the, like the end-of-the-semester feel like you're working towards something, whereas like work, it gets very monotonous. You know, I'm three months into my full-time job now and I came to the realization like, ‘Oh, this just never ends. I have to keep going. I don't get a break or anything like that.’*

MAGGIE: Also, like you mentioned, like they should be all having a good time. Well, Gen Z isn't as into, you know, the drinking culture and the partying culture. And so, you know, some of them are finding that community and structure in this other way.

*<CLIP> LIMAS: But I have started a group chat with a bunch of first time marathoners. But I'm like, ‘Hey, we're all running the marathon. We're all girls. We're all women. Why not just – when we’re stressed out, we'll text each other’? and they've all become friends because of this group chat that I started.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Is it working? Does marathon running and like, you know, having to pee and poop your pants and having your like, nipples bleed fill the void of like, drinking with your friends and having a laugh?

MAGGIE: I mean, there are, like, similarities there, right?

<both laugh>

MAGGIE: Like, we have some of those same problems when we party with our friends in our 20s. You know, I think it does. I, I've actually interviewed some, some social psychologists and folks who focus on, like, that time of life. And, and what they told me was, you know, Yes. Actually having something that you can plan for a big goal and attain gives you such a boost. It gives you a sense of identity. And this is like something that's really important, right, for young people. When you're starting out, you're like, ‘I don't know exactly what my what my job is, what my career is because we live in this weird capitalist society now where, like, you know, careers aren't the thing that they used to be. But I know that I'm a runner.’  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
MAGGIE: ‘And I know that I can make friends with other runners, right? No matter where I live, I can go seek those people out and I can feel really good about that.’

*<CLIP> ROSE: Just having, like, someone that you can knock on the door and be like, ‘Let's go for a run right now’ and they’ll like more often than not, like, just, like, drop everything and be like, ‘Yeah, let's go. Like, let's have a great time together.’ I think that is really like another level of our friendship that I don't think would be there otherwise.*

MAGGIE: So it's an interesting – it's an interesting parallel, I think.

SEAN: How do all the people who finish like, you know, first feel about all these newcomers who are maybe finishing closer to the back, you know?

MAGGIE: You know, I think generally people are excited to see more, more people participating. I do think there is kind of a conversation around whether some of these majors are getting too crowded.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.   
  
MAGGIE: You know, 55,000 people is a lot of people to run with. It can make it a little less fun, I think.

*<CLIP> RUNNER: I’ve never been at a race where it’s so crowded. Everybody’s just clustered together, and the water stops are only on one side of the road. So the whole field goes there to get a drink.*

MAGGIE: But also, you know, I think that there is this sort of segregation that goes on in the running world at this point anyway, like, it's a very different experience if you're kind of a more elite runner like you're going to be running out front, you're going to be finishing in a couple of hours. You're not really going to even be exposed to these people who are running in 5 or 6 and, and taking their time. So I really think it doesn't… <laughing> it doesn't matter. Maybe some people are a little bit catty about it. But, like we talked about at the beginning, like that, calling yourself a runner means you run, right? And maybe some people will argue like, ‘Oh, well, I'm an elite three sub-three hour marathoner, so I'm a real runner.’ But, you know, if you finish, you finish.

SCORING <I Can Dig It He Can Dig It She Can Dig It We Can Dig It They Can Dig It>

SEAN: Are you a runner? I didn't ask, but are you going to be out there at the New York City Marathon this weekend?

MAGGIE: I am a runner. I have not run a marathon yet. I have run a half marathon, which I really actually enjoyed and I did not know that I was going to. <laughs> So I will be at the New York City Marathon this weekend. I will be watching and cheering from the sidelines because it's just one of my favorite marathons to watch. I think it's so beautiful. I love watching people cheer on strangers for doing something hard.

SEAN: Mmhmm.

*<NATSOUND> CHICAGO MARATHON CHEERERS @ MILE 21*

MAGGIE: Like, it’s just a beautiful form of humanity.

SEAN: Well, I got to say, I will never run a marathon, but I used to live two blocks away from the New York City Marathon course, and I loved waking up at my leisure at like 10:00 or whatever and walking over there, hungover, to cheer people on so I can I can at least get on with that.

MAGGIE: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's a role for everyone, right? If you have a friend running a marathon, like be that friend who goes out and makes your friend the sign, I think that's like such a wonderful thing to do.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Maggie Mertens is the author of “Better, Faster, Farther: How Running Changed Everything We Know about Women.” We’re gonna ask a psychologist what running a marathon does to your noggin when we return on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> ROSE: I've tried run clubs and stuff like that, but that's more for like… I don't know, I have a long term girlfriend. I don't need to go to a run club because they're usually looking for other things other than, like, a good workout.*

*<CLIP> FORMER TEX PRODUCER DENISE GUERRA: This is Today, Explained.*

DR. KEVIN MASTERS (University of Colorado, Denver professor): Uh, my name is Kevin Masters. I'm usually identified as by – either Dr. Masters or Professor Masters. Or Kevin works as well. But, you know, if you want to be “professional” about it. <chuckles>

SEAN: Kevin's a little too *Home Alone*. I'll go *Doctor* Masters.

<both laugh>

SEAN: *Doctor* Kevin Masters is a professor at the University of Colorado, Denver, where he researches health psychology. He has studied marathons, but also has *run* marathons.

DR. MASTERS: Yeah, that's right. When I finished my first marathon. I had this really interesting emotional experience, where I crossed the finish line full of happiness and sense of accomplishment and all of that. And I went over and sat down and proceeded to start weeping into a towel.

SEAN: Hmm!

DR. MASTERS: And I thought, ‘Boy, that's odd.’ You know, and so I'm getting my doctorate in clinical psychology at the time and I'm thinking, ‘Wow, that's really an interesting emotional response. I didn't see that coming at all. I'm not even sure what's happening, but something's happening that's pretty interesting.’ And then I was running another marathon, and I was running, and, you know, we were at like mile five and we're still chatting. I'm chatting with a fellow runner and he, you know, ‘What do you do?’ ‘I'm researching,’ and ‘What are you going to do your dissertation on?’ And I said, ‘I don't know. I'm thinking about marathon runners.’ And he says to me, ‘Marathon runners! Why would you study marathon runners? They're boring.’

SEAN: <laughs>

DR. MASTERS: ‘You should study pool players!’  
  
SEAN: Wow.   
  
DR. MASTERS: And I thought, ‘That's a crazy comment.’ <laughing> You know, that's like, I'll never hear that comment again in my life. And it came from a guy who's running marathons.

SEAN: Huh!

DR. MASTERS: So I just decided what's going on with these people? What's, what's up? And are people all running for the same reasons or different reasons? And then there was really much more of a public health interest in it as well, because most of our population does not get enough exercise – aerobic exercise – through their week. But marathon runners take it to a whole ‘nother level. And so so one of the things I was interested in was could we learn anything from marathon runners that would be useful with the rate with the general population in terms of just getting people to not necessarily run marathons, but to just get out and run or, you know, fast walk or do some moderate, vigorous activity.

SEAN: Okay, so you did the marathon research. What did you discover?

DR. MASTERS: Well, I think the first thing we discovered is that people run for many different reasons. And you can kind of categorize them into groups, you know, sort of based on those reasons. For example, they differed based on gender, they differed based on some of their training habits and their times in the marathon. So these look like differences of motivation that actually had something to say about their behavior as well.

SEAN: Hmm.

DR MASTERS: We also looked into what people think about when they're running in training or running in the marathon. So we found that in the marathon, although people go back and forth between association and dissociation: am I *associating,* or thinking about my body and performance, or am I *dissociating* and thinking about anything else? And we found that the amount of association went up in marathons compared to training runs, which makes sense. There's more of a performance issue there that comes into play. But in training runs, people think about everything you can possibly imagine:

SCORING <Another Perfect Day Foldling Things Into Donkeys>

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Ok, so I’m about to go run 85 minutes, and I thought for, like, my run vlog, it would be funny if I just, like, told you all my run thoughts. Now I’m listening to ‘Country Roads’ and it’s reminding me of the summer camp I used to go to because we use to sing it as a camp song. Just blasting ‘Country Roads’…*

DR MASTERS: Some of them think about work problems that they can't solve. Some of them think about relationship problems.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: I’m gonna marry an American. I’m gonna get my green card. I’m gonna move to Florida. I’m gonna marry an American…*

DR. MASTERS Some people reported to us that they spontaneously found answers to problems that they couldn't come up with otherwise. Basically, you name it, their mind can go there.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Michael Jordan. Genuinely, I thought about this entire run. It was towards the end. Is he alive? I don’t know. I literally cannot pull that out of my brain.*

DR. MASTERS: But it does tend to be more positive than negative, which we attribute to the exercise itself, and you know how that's affecting them.

SCORING OUT   
  
DR. MASTERS: For some of the folks, running a marathon served psychological needs. We called these lifestyle managers, was the name we gave to them.

SEAN: Hm.

DR MASTERS: And so these were folks who were motivated by a whole group of reasons. But but having to do with a lot of psychology aspects of running the marathon like self-esteem, life meaning, coping with troubling emotions.

*<CLIP> TAYLOR-NICOLE: For me, it's super emotional because I have worked so hard. I've had one of the toughest years probably this past year. And running has really just kind of saved me, in a way. I will say that. It's a culmination of everything I've been through and taking all the negative and turning it into such a huge accomplishment that I think when I cross the finish line, I will be bawling my eyes out. <laughing>*

DR MASTERS: That was about a quarter of the people that we surveyed in our, in the different studies who fit into that group.

SEAN: What do you make of all the young people who are getting into running right now, clinically speaking?

DR. MASTERS: I do believe that there's a psychological component to the trend today. And what makes me say that is: we find among Gen Z a number of interesting traits often found in young folks in their 20s or early 30s, but maybe carried to, to a bigger extremes. You know, our surgeon general just did a report on loneliness among Americans and particularly among young Americans.

*<CLIP> SURGEON GENERAL VIVEK MURTHY: We’ve in fact seen a decrease in participation in community organizations, in faith organizations, and recreational leagues over several decades. We’ve seen that technology has fundamentally changed how we interact with one another…*

DR MASTERS: And I think what that does is it leaves a bit of a void. Where people used to gain some of their purpose and meaning in life and, and feel affiliated with others, those aren't really doing it for the younger folks as much.

SEAN: Mm.

DR. MASTERS: And I think marathon running does provide a way of doing a lot of those things. If you really think about marathon running – and it could be other endurance events, too – but what's involved here: you really orient your day – which turns into your weeks, which turns into months – around this event. That's kind of an orienting principle for your life when you think about it and you do things that you didn't do before and that people find to be somewhat difficult to do. You change your diet or you at least watch when you eat because nobody can throw down a Big Mac and then go for a two-hour training run.

SEAN: <laughs>  
  
MASTERS: You know, that's just not going to happen, right? So you got to change that and you got to… you have to do a lot of management of your life around a purpose, around a goal. And so I think that these events can meet a lot of needs for people who used to get those needs met other places.

SEAN: But generally you see this trend – you've been, you've been observing, researching marathons for like, it sounds like for almost 40 years maybe. And you see this explosion going on right now, and it sounds like you mostly think this is a good thing.

DR MASTERS: Yeah, I think it mostly is a good thing. I mean, yeah, there are injuries, but you know, it's better than staying home and, you know, not being active and dealing with all the health consequences of that.

SCORING <Flaviokart>

DR. MASTERS: Sure, there… nothing is uniformly good in this world, I guess, but as I see it, I think this is a pretty positive step for people. And to the extent that it becomes a regular lifestyle throughout their life, not necessarily marathons, but just the belief that I can be active, ‘Hey, I did it. I ran a marathon. I know how to be active. I know how to go running.’ Maybe that turns into walking. Like for me, it's now turned into cycling. But I think to the extent that it gives people this belief that ‘I can do this’ and it helps them become something of their habitual lifestyle, I think it's a very good thing.

SEAN: Well, I won't be running a marathon anytime soon. I'll see you, Dr. Masters, on the bike path and wish anyone running marathon, especially this weekend in New York, a safe and satisfying run.

DR MASTERS: Yes. Hope they have nice, cool weather. That’s – you need some cool weather for a good marathon. So I hope they have some of that, too.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Kevin Masters. But he got his PhD. He’s a professor at the University of Colorado Denver.

Amanda Lewellyn is a runner. Matthew Collette is a runner. Laura Bullard prefers to whittle. Rob Byers plays pickleball every Friday, but would prefer I call him a former cyclist. And Andrea Kristinsdottir and I are current cyclists. Not sure what the rest of the team does but they are, in no particular order: Patrick Boyd, who helped with this episode. Victoria Chamberlin, who definitely runs, Avishay Artsy, Miles Bryan, who has a bicycle, Hady Mawajdeh, Zack Mack, who definitely runs, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Eliza Dennis, and Haleema Shah.

Amina Al-Sadi is a supervising editor here. Miranda Kenendy is our executive producer. Noel King definitely runs. We use bops by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]