

Alberto Salazar: An American Runner

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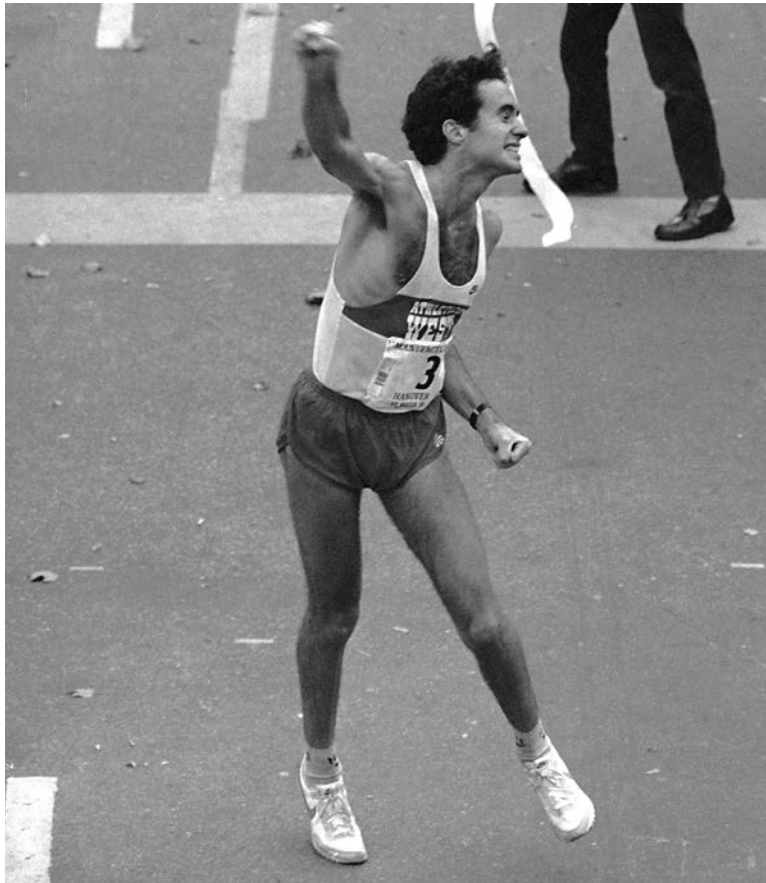
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Written by Steven Accardi

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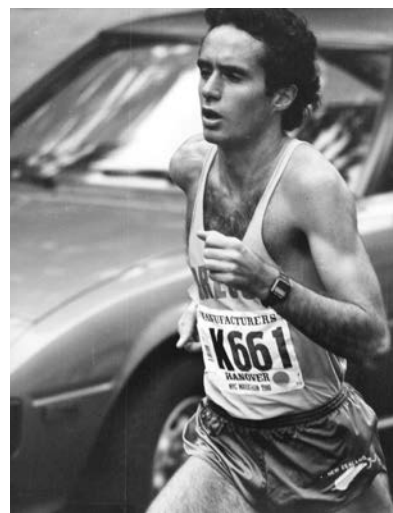
Alberto Salazar, right, runs in the New York City Marathon.

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Quick Start

Have you ever run the mile in gym class? If you haven't yet, you soon will. The mile is a difficult distance to run. It's long and **arduous**. So, unlike dashes, you cannot run at full speed (sprint) the entire way. But what if you could? What if you could sprint the mile without getting tired? How fast do you think you could run it . . .



Alberto Salazar runs his marathon debut in 1980.

in nine, eight, or seven minutes? How about five? Alberto Salazar could. He could not only easily run a mile in five minutes, but he could also run 26 five-minute miles, all in a row, without stopping. Actually, when he won the New York City Marathon in 1981,

he ran even faster than that. He finished the 26.2-mile course in two hours, eight minutes, and thirteen seconds—you do the math. It was a new world record for the time. How did he run so fast for so long? It wasn't easy—and it came with consequences.

Math Minute

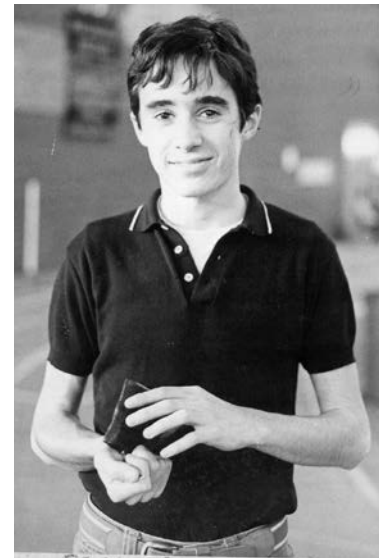
On average, how fast (in minutes) did Alberto Salazar run each mile of the New York City Marathon in 1981? He ran the 26.2-mile course in 2 hours, 8 minutes, and 13 seconds.

Hint: Convert all the time to seconds and divide. Then convert the answer to minutes.



Two years after being born in Havana, Cuba, in 1958, Alberto moved with his family to the United States. First they lived in Miami, Florida; shortly thereafter they moved to Manchester, Connecticut; and finally, nine years later, they moved to Wayland, Massachusetts. It was there, in the small town outside of Boston, that Alberto met Don Benedetti, the cross-country and track coach of Wayland High School.

As a kid, Alberto would run with (and attempt to keep up with) his older brothers. But it was Coach Benedetti who inspired Alberto to work hard and transform his natural talent into something special. Alberto quickly became the fastest runner in the school—and the state. In fact, he became so fast that Coach Benedetti allowed him to train with the Greater Boston Track Club—an elite distance-running group that boasted some of the swiftest runners in the country, including Bill Rodgers, who was soon to become the world's best marathoner.



Alberto in high school

Even though Alberto was only 17 years old, by far the youngest on the team and nicknamed “The Rookie,” he never was **intimidated**. He welcomed the challenge and gave it his all, just like he did when chasing his brothers, and it paid off. By the time he graduated high school, Alberto could run two

miles in under nine minutes—less than four minutes and thirty seconds a mile.



Alberto, right, runs up a grassy hill with University of Oregon teammate Rudy Chapa.

His fast marks drew interest from college coaches around the country. But Alberto only wanted to run for one school: the University of Oregon, which had the top cross-country team in the country at the time. The coach was former Olympian Bill Dellinger, who coached running **phenomenon** Steve Prefontaine. Alberto got what he wanted when Coach Dellinger asked Alberto to join his team, which allowed Alberto to continue his steadily growing running career. He helped the Oregon team win the national cross-country title as a sophomore and won the individual title as a junior. However, it wasn't until his post-college years that Alberto really shined.



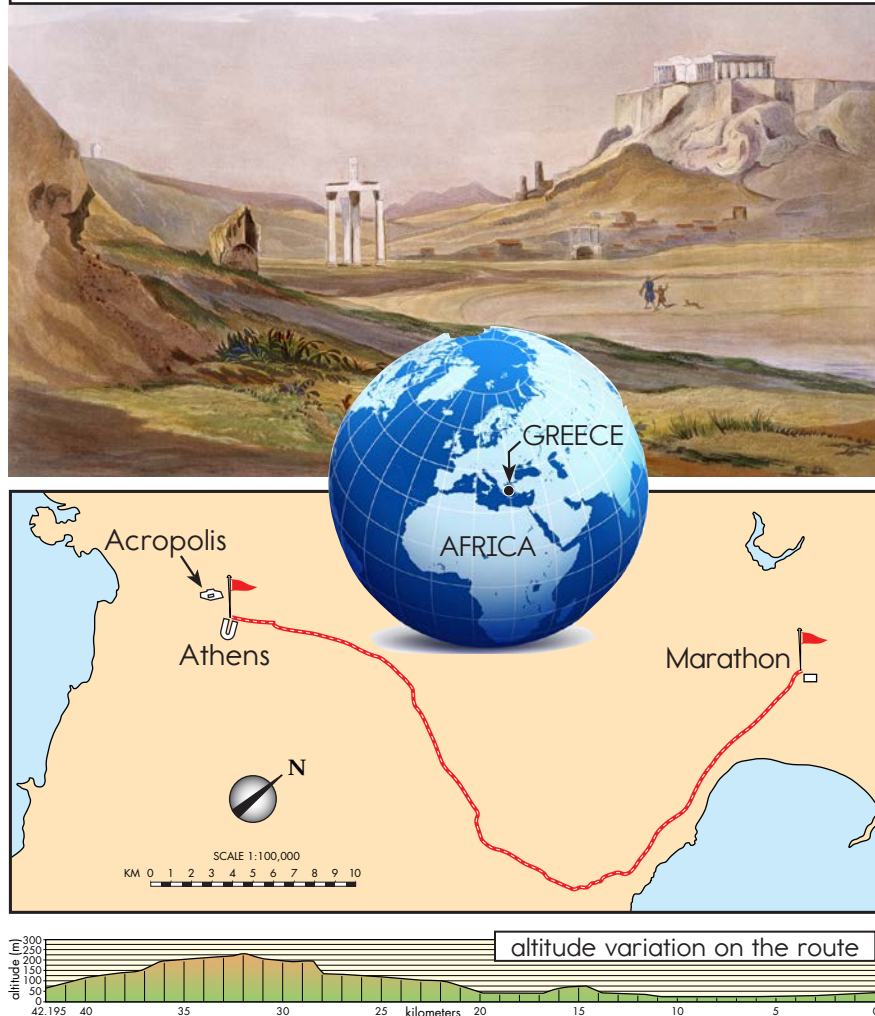
More than 16,000 people ran the New York City Marathon in 1981.

First Steps

In 1980, Alberto was only well-known within college sports, but that would soon change. As a 22-year-old college graduate, he decided to run the New York City Marathon, and suddenly he became a celebrated athlete throughout the world. The marathon is a grueling race, requiring the highest degree of physical and mental strength. Many runners have become so overwhelmed with **fatigue** that they quit the race. Others have suffered injuries halfway through it. Some runners have even died before finishing it.

What Is the Marathon?

The marathon honors the endurance of the Greek soldier Pheidippides who, in 490 BC, ran from a battlefield near Marathon, Greece, to Athens, bringing news of victory over the Persians. After covering the distance of nearly 26 miles (42 km) and delivering the message, he collapsed and died. Ever since, that distance has been considered the mark of an elite athlete.



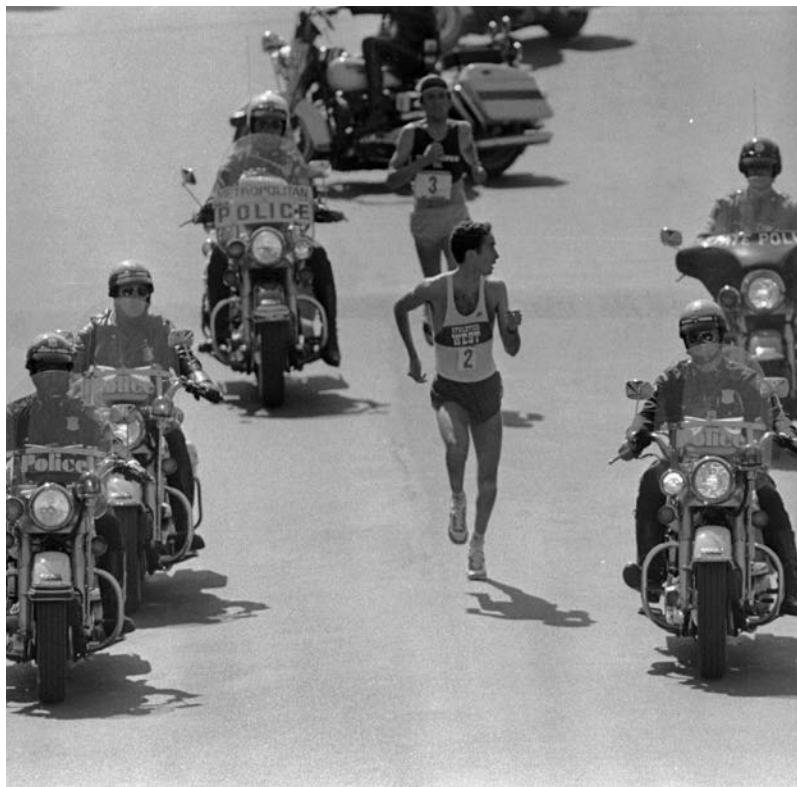
Alberto had never run the marathon before, but after so many successes in college, he was up for the new challenge. When asked what time he thought he would clock for his **debut**, he predicted 2:10 (2 hours and 10 minutes). Many of the sports reporters covering the event scoffed. No runner in his or her first marathon had ever achieved such a swift time. Some writers even grew upset and called Alberto cocky. He responded that he was confident, had put in the training, and was mentally prepared. It turned out that Alberto was a man of his word, shocking the world.

Not only did Alberto cross the finish line in 2:09:41, but he also won the race. It was the fastest debut marathon in U.S. history and the second-fastest U.S. marathoner time ever, behind Bill Rodgers (who ran 2:09:27 in 1979). The following year, Alberto won the New York City



Bill Rodgers

Marathon again, this time in 2:08:13, setting a world record. In 1982, he won yet again. However, most don't remember 1982 as the year Alberto won in New York for the third straight year; they remember it instead as the historic year of "The Duel in the Sun" at the Boston Marathon.



Alberto looks over his shoulder to check the progress of Dick Beardsley as they near the finish of the Boston Marathon.

Boston: A Turning Point

The Boston Marathon is one of the oldest and most **prestigious** races in the world. The course is grueling, full of rolling hills as it winds its way through small towns before reaching downtown Boston. The race always draws some of the world's best runners, who must meet a **qualifying** time before running the race.



Alberto, left, wins the 86th annual Boston Marathon—two seconds ahead of Dick Beardsley, right.

The 1982 Boston Marathon is sometimes called “The Duel in the Sun” because of the intense battle between Alberto Salazar and Dick Beardsley in the blazing heat. Dick wasn’t nearly as well known as Alberto. He ran the two-mile in high school almost a minute slower than Alberto did and dropped out of college to manage a dairy farm. Then one day, after reading a magazine article about training for the 1980 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials, Dick chose to start running again. He ran 2:21:54 and qualified for the trials by two seconds. At the trials, he clocked a time of 2:16:01 but didn’t make the Olympic team. After coming so close, he began training full-time to make the 1984 Olympic marathon team. The Boston Marathon took place in the middle of that training.

When Dick and Alberto toed the line that day, Alberto was expected to win because he had set the world record just a few months earlier in New York. But Dick pushed Alberto to his limit. The two traded the lead throughout the entire 26.2 miles. With five miles to go, Dick held the lead, but with a mile to go, Alberto took it. Then, with a quarter of a mile left, Dick surged. The crowds went wild. With 100 meters left, Dick pulled even. The noise was deafening. Then Alberto looked over. The two locked eyes. And Alberto kicked it in, outrunning Dick by two seconds, finishing in 2:08:52, a new course record. The two were completely exhausted. Alberto had never been pushed like that before. He had to be transported to the emergency room afterward because he was so **dehydrated**. Even though later that year Alberto won the New York City Marathon for the third straight time, he was never the same. It was the beginning of his decline.



Alberto raises Dick's arm.

New Challenges

The Boston duel had taken a toll on his body. Alberto was unable to run as fast as he had before. At the 1984 Summer Olympics, he was predicted



Despite Alberto's 15th place finish, the 1984 U.S. Olympic track and field team did well.

to win the marathon, if not medal, but only finished 15th in 2:14:19. He began to train harder—too hard. Instead of running 70 miles a week (10 miles a day), he'd run 140. If he still was not satisfied with his performance, he'd run 200 miles a week—more than a marathon each day. His body just couldn't keep pace with his ambition to be the fastest long-distance runner in the world.

His **immune system** failed, bringing about sudden and frequent illness. Then came a series of injuries. By 1990, his body had completely broken down, and he wasn't even able to jog anymore. Alberto thought he might never run again. Suddenly, what had brought him so much joy as a kid and fame throughout high school, college, and his adult career was now gone. He became deeply **depressed**.

For the next several years, Alberto struggled—physically, mentally, and emotionally. What pulled him slowly out of depression was an important **realization**: he needed to listen to his body. For so long, his body had responded positively to the amount of **abuse** it suffered from his training routine, and after achieving so many feats from that training style—successes that no one else in the world had achieved before—a feeling that his body was invincible had seeped into his mind. It was only a matter of time before his body broke down, but having pushed it for so long left him deaf to his body’s signs (illness) and screams (injuries) for rest. Thus, when it finally shut down in order to heal and recover from the pounding it had endured, Alberto realized the grim consequences of his more-must-be-better training **theories**.



Alberto pushed his body harder than ever to win the 1982 Boston Marathon.



In 2008, Alberto ran in his first race after having a heart attack.

Alberto **surrendered** and gave his body a well-deserved rest. His recovery was very slow but steady, and eventually his legs came back. He considered running again, but hesitated. He wanted to succeed in whatever race he chose to run, yet he didn’t want to rely on his old training style. He decided to trust his new point of view on running: to create a relationship with his body so that it would respond when he listened to it and not when he abused it.

Not Finished

He began running again. He chose to train for a new distance—the ultra-marathon. He hoped for success similar to what he experienced just after college with winning his first four marathons, a distance he had never run before. **Miraculously**, he got back in shape and in 1994 announced that he would run the Comrades Marathon, a 56-mile test of endurance through South Africa. Again sports reporters wrote him off, just like they did when Alberto announced the time he would secure when running his first marathon fresh out of college. And just like before, he was victorious. Now Alberto was ready for other new challenges.



Alberto, right, coached Dan Brown, who ran the marathon for the 2004 U.S. Olympic team.

Alberto lives in Oregon with his wife and three children. He's spent the past several years training kids and young **athletes** for Nike, using a more balanced style developed from his experiences over the years. He suffered a heart attack while walking with some of those young athletes, but recovered fully thanks to the quick actions of several individuals. A family history of heart disease is something even a healthy runner cannot escape.

Alberto has agreed to continue training the five athletes under his guidance, but no others. Many of the runners who have followed his training advice have been highly successful. Most of them run the mile very quickly—well under five minutes.



Alberto coached Adam Goucher, left, and Galen Rupp, right.

Glossary

abuse (<i>n.</i>)	the physical or psychological mistreatment of a living thing (p. 15)
arduous (<i>adj.</i>)	very hard; requiring continual effort or work (p. 4)
athletes (<i>n.</i>)	people trained in sports, games, or other activities that require strength, speed, and skill (p. 18)
debut (<i>n.</i>)	the first appearance of a performance in public (p. 10)
dehydrated (<i>adj.</i>)	suffering a dangerous lack of water (p. 13)
depressed (<i>adj.</i>)	feeling a state of unhappiness and hopelessness (p. 14)
fatigue (<i>n.</i>)	great tiredness or weariness from mental and/or physical activity (p. 8)
immune system (<i>n.</i>)	a collection of cells and organs in the human body that protect against disease-causing germs (p. 14)
intimidated (<i>adj.</i>)	frightened or overwhelmed (p. 6)

miraculously (<i>adv.</i>)	in a way that seems performed by or involved with a supernatural power (p. 17)
phenomenon (<i>n.</i>)	an observable event or occurrence (p. 7)
prestigious (<i>adj.</i>)	having honor, respect, or high status (p. 11)
qualifying (<i>adj.</i>)	showing a minimum ability in a preliminary contest (p. 11)
realization (<i>n.</i>)	the result of understanding something clearly (p. 15)
surrendered (<i>v.</i>)	gave up or admitted defeat; submit to the authority of an opponent (p. 16)
theories (<i>n.</i>)	possible explanations (p. 15)

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