# Southern Running

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I don't think of distance running as a sport. Skill, technique and strategy are the sort of things you need for actual sports. Maybe there's another level of running where elegant flips of the ankle or advanced strategies for putting one foot in front of the other come into play, but I haven't found it yet. If I try to imagine what color commentary for running-if-it-was-sport would sound like, it just sounds like farce, "Look at the way he's making that turn! Just the perfect angle of attack going into it — I wonder what's going through his head right now?" It's not much of a mystery to me what's going on inside his head right now. It's alternating between a sharp blue exhausted emptiness and bargaining. Bargaining between the mind and the body, alternately begging and cajoling and pleading and prodding, trying to convince the legs to keep pounding forward. Promising that the end is in sight. Just a little longer until it's time to collapse into a tired heap of sweat and Gatorade. Begging, cajoling, pleading and prodding to push through the pain.

I fully accept I may be in the wrong on this one. I'm sure there are folks out there well-versed in running strategy, whatever that may be. My understanding of running as requiring nothing more than a body that can put one foot in front of the other and a head that won't ask it stop is something I learned from one particular corner of the South under one eccentric cross country coach.

There's a strain of Christianity which isn't as prominent these days but winds back two thousand years. It says the world isn't something to be enjoyed. The world is something to suffer through. It's saying, "Your reward is not in this world but the next," and actually meaning it. Flannery

O'Connor gave life to it most poetically in the character of Hazel Motes, stuffing his shoes with gravel to walk miles in bloody penance to a god he aches not to believe in. I wouldn't suggest that the South has proven especially resistant to the currently dominant prosperity gospel strain of Christianity. But this older understanding of the world as a toy of the devil, a place where suffering should be expected, just as a matter of course, as part of the journey from a fallen world to heaven, is still alive and well in parts of it.

When I lace up my shoes and begin stretching for a run, I do so with trepidation. I expect, at some point before I return, to suffer for a bit. Not nobly or valiantly or meaningfully. And certainly not suffering comparable to that which people feel from loss or violence or hardship that isn't a self-imposed jog around a hilly circle. But at some point, I know my legs will begin to burn as they turn soft and my breath will tear sharply into the back of my throat and still not be enough to fill my ravenous lungs and a voice inside my head will beg me to stop and the rest of my body which has no voice will shout wordlessly for me to stop. And I have to say no. Just as a matter of course.

My high school cross country coach used to relate a potentially apocryphal anecdote about a world class marathon runner whose name I've forgotten. An interviewer asked how long into the race it took before it started to hurt. "Fifteen minutes," he replied. A fifteen minute prelude to over two hours of pain. Coach was good at setting expectations if nothing else. I might have naively imagined that with enough training, running would start to get easier. That'd I'd hone myself until speed became effortless. The opposite is true. That strength just becomes fuel for pushing the body harder and harder at an ever more unreasonable pace. Training just unlocks more lengths to push through.

This short anecdote contained our coach's entire coaching strategy. That running is supposed to hurt, sure. Rubbery legs or ragged breaths would never be an excuse to skip a lap. But more fundamentally, that running is as much about mental fortitude as physical ability. That a successful runner is one who doesn't shy from pain. A runner should just accept it, as a matter of course. He was telling us that training is for learning to weather pain, not extinguish it. So he set about training our minds as best he knew how.

"Askew!" he'd shout as he ran the warm up together with the team. "Yes, Coach?" I'd reply.

"Askew, did Darwin make the sun?"

"The sun?"

"That's right, Askew. The sun. Darwin, Charles Darwin — did he make the sun?"

"No, Coach." We'd been over this before. Coach explained that Charles Darwin, who did not create the sun, although many people seemed to act like he did, had in fact created an unscientific, unfalsifiable and unproven theory on the origin of life. The idea the men had come from monkeys was degrading, defeatist. That man came from God and was destined for greatness was clear, and those who claimed otherwise were apologists for man's worst instincts. "That's right, Askew. God. God created the sun."

It's important to understand that Coach wasn't just a crank performing for an impressionable young audience or a zealous street preacher (although he was a bit of both those things.) Moral instruction was a critical part of his coaching strategy. It's what would give us the strength to push through the most agonizing leg of a race. No monkey would sign up to run in circles to the point of absolute exhaustion for no reward besides a plastic medal. Willingly accepting suffering to no ostensible end is the sole provenance of humans. Coach was trying to provide protection from a creeping nihilism that asks, "What's the point of all this pain?"

Of course, he saw that nihilism as creeping through every orifice of society. Across warm ups, cool downs and long, slow distance runs, essentially any time he had the breath to spare, Coach took advantage of his chance to preach to a captive audience, trying to provide the moral instruction he believed would allow us to become good runners. We learned that American had in fact won the Vietnam war. (He was, for better or worse, a history teacher at our school.) Narratives to the contrary were just examples of defeatism or a pernicious campaign to obscure America's greatness as an offering to the altar of cultural relativism. Our practices took on historical proportions. "Y'all look like the French after Ardennes!" he'd shout after a disappointing practice. "The French *lost* Ardennes!" he'd clarify for anyone who'd yet to take his class. On a good day, we were Americans storming Normandy.

I remember one day after a strong race, he told me, "Good work, Askew. Now if you'd just get your politics straight, you could really be a great runner." I don't know who sold me out. Or how he figured me out — he'd heard me admit that Darwin didn't create the sun, after all. But he'd spotted some piece of what I'd hoped was closeted liberalism that

he believed was getting in the way of the crucial matter of running. Of stepping back from expectations of ease or endorphins, confronting pain and sprinting through it as the Allies had hails of bullets on D-Day.

I do want to emphasize that his commitment to democratic principles prevented him from going after my politics with the ferociousness he approached much of the rest of his life. He wasn't an eternally dour character, either. Coach also had a childlike glee to him. Some days after practice he'd find some bit of detritus. A broken computer hiding a dumpster. A cinder block propping a door open. He'd walk to the top of the bleachers we were all stretching behind, lugging his bit of treasure to the top row. And he'd toss his new favorite toy over the bleachers onto the concrete below, over and over and over, whooping and cheering and grinning, watching with joy as it smashed to pieces. His conservatism even had a bit of that same glee to it.

Once I was at his house, and he walked me to a back room to show off the fruits of one of his hobbies. He had a menagerie of figurines he'd painted and models he'd built. They were mostly World War II soldiers. Rifleman, grenadiers, machine gunners, all in dramatic poses, detailed and dressed to historic accuracy. And stood at the center of all these heroes was one little figurine. Clothed immaculately in a neatly tailored navy suit, stood a tiny Ronald Reagan.