

WHY DO I RUN?

BY GEORGE SHEEHAN

I have written over the years of the benefits I receive from running. Enumerated the physical and mental changes. Listed the emotional and spiritual gains. Charted the improvement that has taken place in my person and my life. What I have not emphasized is how transient these values and virtues are.

With just a little thought, however, it should be evident that physical laws parallel those of the mind and the spirit. We know that the effects of training are temporary. I cannot put fitness in the bank. If inactive, I will detrain faster than it took me to get in shape. And since my entire persona is influenced by my running program, I must remain constantly in training. Otherwise, the sedentary life will inexorably reduce my mental and emotional well-being.

So, I run each day to preserve the self I attained the day before. And coupled with this is the desire to secure the self yet to be. There can be no let up. If I do not run, I will eventually lose all I have gained—and my future with it.

Maintenance was a favorite topic of writer and philosopher Erik Hoffer. It made the difference, said the former longshoreman, between a country that was successful and one that failed. An achievement, no matter how magnificent, will eventually decay if not preserved by constant care.

I know that experience intimately. There is nothing briefer than the winner's laurel. Victory is of the moment. It must be followed by another victory and then another. I have to run just to stay in place.

Excellence is not something attained and put in a trophy case. It is not sought after, achieved, and, thereafter, a steady state. It is a momentary phenomenon, a rare conjunction of body, mind, and spirit at one's peak. Should I come to that peak, I cannot stay there. Like Sisyphus, I must start each day at the bottom and work back up to the top. And then beyond that peak to another and yet another.

Through running I have learned what I can be and do. My body is now sensitive to the slightest change. It is particularly aware of any decline or decay. I can feel this lessening of the "me" that I have come to think of myself.

Running has made this new me. Taken the raw material and honed it and delivered it back ready to do the work of a human being. I run so I do not lose the me I was yesterday and the me I might become tomorrow.

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