

CROSSING THE LINE



The Primal Runner

How an aging *Sports Medicine* article helps me survive the technological era

By Kelly Bouchard

In 2007, anthropologist Daniel Lieberman and biologist Dennis Bramble published a landmark article in *Sports Medicine* titled “The Evolution of Marathon Running.” In the span of about three pages, they argued that humans are physiologically better suited to distance running than nearly any other animal, and that our running abilities helped us compete for prey from the time they emerged in our hominid predecessors two million years ago, until as recently as 50,000 years ago, when projectiles decisively replaced endurance as our most potent predatory advantage.

I encountered this article as a university freshman the year of its publication when it was, frankly, hard to avoid. Everyone from running magazine writers to forum contributors weighed in on its meaning and validity and it quickly became a favourite reference for advocates of the emerging school of runners who argued for a back-to-basics approach that included the use of barefoot or minimalist footwear. (The fact that the article had nothing explicit to say about shoes didn’t seem to deter them.) Later, I myself would become a short-lived but enthusiastic member of this school, but the more immediate effect of reading Lieberman and Bramble was a reconceptualizing of running itself. The article helped me see running less as a sport and more as a way to connect to something primal,

ancient and quintessentially human.

Today, the notion of minimalist shoes’ superiority has been largely debunked, and the article’s popularity seems to have suffered by association. But, for me, its importance has only increased as the subjects of tech addiction and the negative health effects of our sedentary lifestyles have gone from fringe issues to matters of pressing concern. 50,000 years after the bow rendered our endurance obsolete, many of us exist in a state of technology-cocooned comfort so extreme it tests what we can physically and mentally bear. I know I’ve reached my limit when I emerge from several hours on YouTube in which I have literally lost myself in clicking, and scrolling, and searching for...something, a process as weirdly existential as it is disturbingly mindless.

As “The Evolution of Marathon Running” taught me years ago, going for a run doesn’t just drag me out of my chair and away from my screen. Out on the trail, my body fulfills its historic role and the unfiltered world presses in around me. In the beat of my heart, the rhythmic striking of my feet, and the coursing of synaptic pathways in my brain, I lose myself in a feeling as old as humanity itself. I find myself in visceral contact with an aspect of my character that the modern world otherwise occludes, and this serves as an invaluable touchstone in an era where we seem increasingly defined by our technology alone.

Much has changed since 2007. Social media has risen to global dominance, smartphones have become omnipresent and Lieberman and Bramble’s article is no longer at the centre of an emerging running trend. But for me, the article bears frequent revisiting. Its central message speaks to how running transcends our current time and cuts straight to our collective heart, and that idea is as relevant today as it was 12, or 50,000, or even two million years ago. **R**

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