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Slow and Steady Loses the Race

U.S. runners are pokier than they were in 1979.

By CAMERON STRACHER

This summer, more Americans than ever have laced up their running shoes and entered road races. That's the good news. The bad news is that America's runners have never been slower, fatter or more out of shape. How is this possible? How can running enjoy a new wave of popularity while the sport itself has never been in more trouble? The answer lies in the peculiarity of foot races on the road.

It's been two decades since an American-born athlete has won a major U.S. marathon. In the last Olympics, Americans won only one medal in running events from 800 meters to the marathon. At the middle distances, no native U.S. runner has won a prestigious road race like Bay to Breakers, Peachtree or Falmouth for nearly 20 years. Meanwhile, the number of people who say they run for exercise has increased four-fold since the 1980s to about 40 million today.

Rather than spawning a new generation of champions—as it might in another sport—the increase in the number of runners has, in fact, slowed the median pace in the typical race. (The average time in the marathon has gone from 3:32:17 in 1980 to 4:13:36 in 2009). In other words, the increasing popularity of running coincides with the decreasing competitiveness of the U.S. runner.

But it's not just that slower, less well-trained runners are competing in races. In absolute terms fewer U.S. runners are running fast. Except for Ryan Hall (on a faster course in London), no American-born runner has ever run faster than Alberto Salazar's 2:08:13 marathon in New York in 1981. Meanwhile, three times as many male runners achieved the same qualifying time in the U.S. Olympic marathon trials in 1984 as in 2008. The story is the same at nearly every event up the distance ladder. With the exception of a few standouts (for example, Alan Webb), U.S. runners cannot match the times of their earlier progenitors.

Times have also slowed among the "sub-elite" or so-called club runner, the ranks from which champions emerge. Consider that in 1978 more than 2,000 runners broke three hours at the Boston marathon. In 2002, with a field nearly three times as large, only about 1,000 runners broke the three-hour barrier. At the seven-mile Falmouth Road Race, in 1979, a finishing time of 36 minutes was good

enough only for 84th place. But in 2009, the same time would have earned 34th place.

Thirty-five years ago champions like Frank Shorter, Bill Rodgers and Alberto Salazar were born out of a vibrant club culture that trained, drank and raced together. Today, clubs like the Greater Boston Track Club have trouble luring post-collegiate athletes. Instead, young people are less physically active, drawn to other sports, and more likely to be worried about finding a job than running a race.

The demise of the American runner was hastened by the success of the first running boom in the 1970s and the embrace of running as a "pastime" rather than a sport. As more people were encouraged to "just do it," racing (and training) were dumbed down for the masses. Runners were told they could do a perfectly respectable marathon on 30 miles a week, 5k road races popped up all around the country (replacing the more difficult 10k), and running culture celebrated (and elevated) the participant over the winner. Today, it is not unusual for most runners to neither know, nor care, who won the race in which they were running.

Of course, physical activity—of any kind—is good. At a time of increasing obesity it seems counterproductive to complain about more people trying to keep fit. Yet the Sunday golfer has managed to keep his love of the game separate from his appreciation of Tiger Woods's chip shot. The former gets him out on the course; the latter keeps him glued to the TV. Until running finds a way to do the same, we are doomed to numerical inferiority, celebrating mediocrity as if it were victory.

Mr. Stracher is writing a book about the 1970s and the running boom.

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