

SUMMARY **BORN** **TO RUN**

CHRISTOPHER McDougall



Summary of “Born to Run” by Christopher McDougall

Written by Alyssa Burnette

If you’ve ever wanted to run a marathon, Born to Run (2009) can help you accomplish your goal! Tackling the idea that marathon runners are some type of superhuman species, McDougall proves that everyone is capable of becoming a successful runner.

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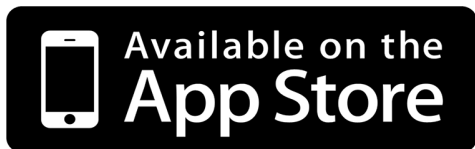


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Introduction

Have you ever wanted to run a marathon? Or are you more like me, and refuse to run unless something is chasing you? (And maybe it's still not worth running even then!) No matter which side of the spectrum you fall on, marathons tend to be a fairly divisive way of categorizing people, with us considering people who do run as some kind of superhuman and ourselves as lazy potatoes by comparison. But what if I told you that it's actually not quite so different as you think? What if I even told you that, with the right training, you could actually run 26 miles at a pretty fast pace? If that sounds like fake news, just keep reading, because in the course of this summary, you'll learn why human beings are actually born to run.

Evolution Equipped us For Distance Running

What's the fastest land animal in the world? You might say the cheetah, and you'd be right-- when it comes to sprints. But when we're talking about distance running, like marathons, human beings actually take first prize.

Why? The simple answer is that evolutionary adaptations caused us to develop skills that are perfect for distance runs. One reason for that is that humans are able to process heat more rapidly than other mammals.

Because running generates considerable friction and heat, our bodies need to cool off in order to stay in motion. And although we do that through sweating, most animals don't have the right glands to sweat effectively, which means that their primary means of reducing heat is through breathing.

Another key difference is how we run. Four legged animals achieve high speeds by breaking into a gallop and although this method of running is fast, it also restricts their airflow by squishing their lungs. This means that they're unable to breathe well enough to properly regulate the heat in their bodies and as such, they're ill-equipped for distance running. That's because they'll ultimately reach a point where their body is taking on heat faster than they can cool down which means that they'll soon have to stop running in order to survive. People, on the other hand, handle heat very differently. Because we sweat through our skin, our ability to run long distances at high speeds isn't dictated by our lung capacity. We're also not limited by a need to cool down, which makes us even more effective at enduring high heats and speeds for long distances.

Another key factor that's slightly obvious is that people are faster because they move on two legs instead of four. The evolutionary advantage of learning to walk upright allowed humans' throats and chests to expand, a development which improved posture and increased air supply, thereby enabling us to maintain high speeds over long distances. Our Achilles tendon is the third trait which marks humans as distinguished runners. Although 95% of our DNA correlates to that of our very close relative, the

chimpanzee, these primates lack the flexible, almost elastic band of tissue we possess in our lower legs. When stretched, this tendon stores energy until it's released by our legs propelling our bodies into action. This advantage maximizes our endurance because it takes less energy to shoot forward with quick steps. So, in short, evolution is the reason why you can become a great marathon runner but your dog can't!

Running Shoes Aren't as Helpful as You Think

You know how, when we're making our New Years' resolutions about getting more exercise, we psych ourselves up by buying cute gym clothes and new running shoes? The logic, of course, is that if we have the right tools for the job-- namely, the proper gear-- we'll be more motivated and have a competitive advantage. But running shoes can actually be more of a hindrance than a help! Because they offer a lot of support and stabilize your feet-- which is a good thing-- they also run the risk of inhibiting some of our natural, biological gifts that would actually make us better runners. That's because when we run, a process called pronation enables our foot to roll forward. This process also serves as a built-in shock absorber for our lower legs, minimizing the wear and tear that's done to our legs through intense movement.

That probably sounds like a good thing, and it is, but pronation is also responsible for a common and very painful condition called "runner's knee." So, in an effort to minimize pronation-induced pain and help people run more comfortably, a wave of anti-pronation running shoes have flooded the market. Many beginning runners assume that they need these right off the bat, even though a scant 3% of the population actually needs special running shoes to combat pronation. For those who need them, these shoes can be a life saver, but for pretty much everyone else, they're like putting a plaster cast on your foot. And I don't know about you, but I'm unlikely to move well or very quickly if my foot is encased in a plaster cast! So, these shoes don't help the rest of us; instead, they limit our mobility, cause our muscles to atrophy, and lead to a loss of strength in our feet.

This in turn creates an imbalance that can actually make running very difficult and painful and as our bodies seek to overcompensate for this imbalance, extra stress is placed on certain muscles and joints. This can ultimately lead to injuries, which-- ironically-- is exactly what you were trying to prevent with the shoes in the first place! These shoes can also cause problems by masking the pain of harmful impacts on our feet.

Because we sometimes hit the ground too hard, causing painful reverberations through our bodies, we need those twinges of pain to tell us when we've pushed ourselves too far.

However, thickly cushioned running shoes shield us from these sensations, meaning that we often don't know we're injured and continue to run on damaged feet, aggravating an injury before we even know we have it. So, how can we combat this danger? Well, one of the best and most effective methods is to take up barefoot running! Although it might feel a little weird at first, barefoot running teaches us to find our body's natural gait and rhythm and adopt a more comfortable style of running.

Veggies Are Your Friends

If you're looking to maximize your running potential, kicking off your running shoes is a great first step. But now what? While it might be easier to give up your new sneakers than a steak, unfortunately, if you want to channel Superman and be faster than a speeding bullet, you'll have to cut out meat. But don't take my word for it! Just look at a few of these examples throughout history and from around the world. For instance, Japanese monks who were renowned for their skills as marathon runners completed 25,000 mile super-marathons on a diet that consisted exclusively of miso soup, tofu, and vegetables. Likewise, Percy Cerutti-- one of the greatest running coaches of all time-- strongly advocated a vegetarian diet. He believed in the method so much that he often coached many of his greatest runners through triple marathon days on a simple diet of raw oats, fruits, cheeses, and nuts.

Famous runner Scott Jurek took it even farther and went vegan, claiming that his diet enabled him to perform better than ever, despite criticism from other runners who told him he would be slower to recover from workouts and be more prone to injuries as a result of his food choices. So, while you don't have to go all the way and become vegan if it doesn't suit you, for the sake of making an informed choice, you should know that a vegetarian diet is effective because it helps you extract the maximum amount of energy from the minimum amount of calories. As a result, your body is freed from the excess bulk of digesting heavy things like meat and you're able to move more quickly.

That's because it takes your body a lot longer to digest proteins than to process carbohydrates. So, if it helps you to stop missing those hamburgers, think about it this way: less meat more time to train and less energy wasted through an extensive digestive process. And if you're worried about becoming malnourished on a vegetarian diet-- don't be! A diet of grains, legumes, and vegetables is actually very high in the amino acids required for muscle growth and energy production. These benefits mean that you

will not, in fact, be slower to recover from workouts; if anything, they keep your recovery time brief due to their very low digestion time.

So, now that you have the right equipment and the right diet, what's the next step? The right training!

Form and Pace Are Everything

All running is not the same. For example, there's a world of difference between my frantic dash through the crosswalk before the traffic light turns green and the stride of a skilled runner. There's also a tremendous difference between sprinting and marathon running as you can tell if you've ever watched Olympic running events back to back. So, what makes the difference? The simple answer is that it all lies in posture. For example, when you're sprinting, the ideal posture is a straightened back, a steady head, and long, powerful strides. But this isn't at all the formula followed by some world-class athletes from Kenya.

Exercise physiologist and international triathlete Ken Mierke wanted to uncover the Kenyan secret, so he spent hours watching footage of famous barefoot runners from Kenya. At the end of his observations, he concluded that these multi-award winning athletes actually ran more like kindergarteners! So, what in the world does that mean? Well, in terms of professional running techniques, it means that these runners rejected the traditional form of long, powerful strides in favor of small leg contractions that maximize rapid foot turnover. In practice, this style looks a lot like the way children in a beginners' exercise class might run, which prompted Mierke's comparison. However, regardless of appearances, this technique is actually faster and far more efficient for endurance running!

So, Mierke got inspired and decided to coach his clients according to this method. Coming up with a creative-- albeit unusual-- idea, he set a metronome to 180 beats per minute, attached it to his clients, and instructed them to run in time to the metronome's tempo. After five months of training in this manner, a 60-year-old client who had been a successful runner in the top 10% of his age group for over 40 years experienced shocking improvements in his trial time. His track record (no pun intended!) showed that these improvements were more than just the beginner's luck of trying a new method; they were the result of consistent practice and training and they proved that Mierke's method worked! It also

proved that the life-changing results of Mierke's method could be achieved by anyone.

So, now that you've learned about form, it's time to take a look at pacing. Mastering the art of pacing isn't difficult if you know where to start, so begin by trying to stay below the aerobic threshold. If you're not familiar with that term, it simply means the point where you start to breathe heavily. We often reach that point early on because we make the mistake of running too quickly and burning through the energy supply that's generated by our body's sugar reserves. Because that sugar is quick, easily accessible energy and the easiest to go through. However, it's also far more limited than our body's fat supply, which can sustain us through long periods of endurance running. If you want to avoid this common mistake, focus on pacing, which will help you tap into your body's fat reserves and run stronger for longer!

Make Running a Part of Your Identity

What do you consider to be a foundational part of your identity? Is it something personal, like a talent you possess? Is it cultural, like an element of your heritage? For the Tarahumara people of Northern Mexico, running is the central tenet of their identity. In fact, their very name literally translates to “the running people.” It’s a pretty fitting name because they’re known for their ability to regularly run up to 200 miles in a single marathon session. And before you ask, they’re not secretly a tribe of superheroes or aliens-- they’re just normal people who really, really love to run.

That’s what McDougall found when he drove for dozens of hours and braved a two-mile hike to meet the Tarahumara’s legendary runner Arnulfo Guinare. Despite the tribe’s preference to live in isolation and eschew the trappings of the modern world, Guinare was still willing to meet with the author and discuss his passion for running so that it could be shared with the world. Acknowledging that his people’s passion might seem completely foreign to the outside world, Guinare affirmed that there was nothing weird about their key to success. Rather, as a culture, they had cultivated a love for running. It’s that simple and yet that profound! Because their cultural identity was predicated on the belief that running is a necessary human skill, each member of the tribe passed this ideology on to their children, creating a cycle that was perpetuated for generations.

Because children grow up seeing their entire community enjoy running, they come to believe that running is essential for health, for bonding with family, and most importantly, for being a part of the tribe. And by embracing this cultural identity, Tarahumara people learn to run not only for a sense of ancestral pride but also for personal fulfilment.

And when you think about it that way, it’s really no different from any other activities we might pursue for the sake of personal fulfilment. The only difference is that these people found a way to love something we often

dread. It doesn't help that, instead of positive reinforcement like the sort applied by the Tarahumara people, our culture often reinforces laziness through overeating, unhealthy habits, and jokes that make us feel like we're justified in failing to take care of our bodies. But what would happen if we let go of all that? What if we tried to relinquish our preconceived notions about running and tap into that glee we used to feel as a child when we ran everywhere?

Because if you think back to being a kid, you didn't run and think, "I have to do this to stay skinny," or "I can't do this without my morning coffee and the perfect workout song." You ran because you were happy. Because you felt like there was a world to explore. And the truth is, running didn't change-- we did. Running can still be a tremendous source of pleasure if we let it! We just have to change our mindset. That's what the Tarahumara people already know and what we should try to learn.

Final Summary

It's easy to think that running is a personal choice or that some people are simply more athletic. But the truth is, we're actually all capable of becoming skilled and successful runners thanks to evolutionary advantages. In fact, tapping into your potential for speed is as simple as getting the proper training, amending your diet, and throwing away your running shoes. You can also learn to access the natural joy of running just as the Tarahumara people have learned to do.



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