

# Excerpt

From *The Inner Runner*

I have a friend who thinks I, like other hardcore runners, am self-absorbed and elitist, that I am all about running all the time, that nothing else matters, and that if you don't run yourself, you are judged as less than someone who does. She is not alone in her opinion. What bothers many people about runners is our almost arrogant attitude that we are somehow better than everyone else because we run and that by running we are somehow fulfilling some grand destiny. We look at people who don't run as somehow inferior because their resting heart rate is not below fifty, and as somehow complacent because they're not willing to push themselves physically for the pursuit of a faster time on a stopwatch. We wonder when they are going to have a heart attack.

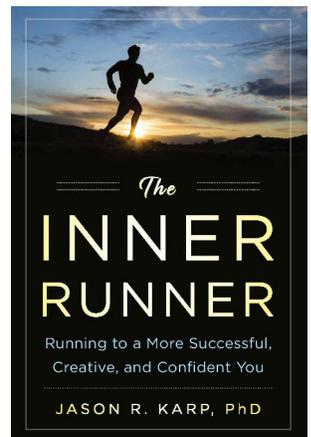
It doesn't take long for non-runners to figure out that runners are indeed a different breed. We spend a lot of time reflecting on our runs and races. We talk about PRs and whether a run felt good or bad. We lay out our clothes on the floor the night before a race like a five-year-old preparing for school tomorrow. We spread a substance called Body Glide on our groin and nipples to prevent chafing during long runs. Most runners are a bit crazy.

Runners have an obsession with running that rivals most other obsessions, perhaps because runners truly believe that they are running toward who they want to be, toward some panacea. For me, and I suspect for many other runners, running narrows the gap between who I am and who I can be, between my reality and my aspirations. If Body Glide helps me to become the person I aspire to be, so be it.

People should do whatever exercise they want to do, as long as they do something. People don't *have* to run. I guess I'm guilty of believing that if people ran, their lives—and the world—would be much better. I really do believe that. There is something about a runner's approach to running and life—and their search for meaning in their running and life—that distinguishes them from all other people who exercise. Problems are solved on runs. Running gives us the promise of hope for a better future. If the world's political leaders ran together for their meetings, and the rest of the public followed their lead, the world would indeed be a better place.

With all of the running I've done over the years, I've been asked many times what I'm running away from. People, especially non-runners, seem to think that because I run a lot, I must be running away from something. Why else would I run so much? Their question always startles me because I've always seen myself as running *toward* something. What it is that I'm running toward I'm not always sure. However, it's usually toward getting faster. This was certainly the case when I was younger and my fastest races were still in my future. I always wanted to be faster. The challenge of getting faster was thrilling. Over the years and through different phases of my life, what I'm running toward has changed.

Lately, I've been running back toward my youth, chasing the times of my younger running self. But, being in my early forties, I reluctantly realize that my fastest races are behind me and I have to find new meaning for my running. I'm still trying to get faster, to get at least within arm's reach of the times of my youth, but now my running is about getting faster relative to my age and to how fast I am today rather than to my personal records I ran in my twenties. It's humbling to say the least. When I race now, I can't help but compare my times to what I used to run. It bothers me that I am running slower than I used to. When I run a bad race and I don't feel sharp, it negatively affects



me. I don't feel good about myself. "Why do I feel this way?" I ask myself. "It's just running." Ultimately, in life's bigger picture, running is just an activity I choose to do. It shouldn't define my self worth. Yet it does, and I am perplexed as to *why*. I suspect that other runners feel the same way. Are runners so self-absorbed—am I so self-absorbed—that I cannot feel good about myself if my running is not going well? Has this been my destiny all along? Running gives a lot of people confidence. It's why I included it as a chapter in this book. For me, however, that confidence is too often tied to how fast I run, and now, in my forties, tied to a comparison of how fast my races used to be and how fast I used to feel. When I run fast, when I *feel* fast, it creates a powerful confidence that penetrates everything else I do. I feel on top of the world. I post pictures on Facebook and Instagram of me racing and include a clever and inspirational caption for my followers. Somehow, being physically fit and fast influences the way I feel about myself and my outlook on the world. It gives me a sense of achievement. For most of us, our confidence is intimately connected to our physical being. Because we live through our bodies. So when I run slower than I want or than I used to, when I don't *feel* fast, my confidence wavers. I don't post any pictures on social media and don't even tell anyone I ran a race. I don't feel like I have achieved. I drive home by myself and overanalyze what just happened. I want to be left alone.

Of course, I can choose to be confident or not. A person's confidence shouldn't be tied to how fast a race is run. We are not destined to let trivial things define who we are. That we often do may reveal a flaw in our design. Or it may reveal one of the cleverest characteristics that distinguish humans from all other animals—the urge to be *better*. No matter how fast or slow we are today, we all have the ability to decide we will try harder, to be better tomorrow, to affect our destiny. That's why runners are so special—because we have an acutely measurable way to know where we are now and we make the decision to try to be better tomorrow. Every runner, whether a twenty-five-year-old world-record holder or an eighty-five-year-old who finishes last in the race—wants to be faster, wants to strive for some better version of him or herself. *That* is our destiny.

But it's not that simple. I can't say that I'm running solely because I want to get faster. I do, but that's not the entire reason. That's not what gets me out the door every day to run. I suppose, when I think hard enough about it, I *am* running away from something. I'm running away from becoming the person I *don't* want to be. I don't want to be that overweight, slow, out-of-shape lazy guy who sits in his La-Z-Boy chair or on a sports bar stool and watches football all day Sunday in his undershirt. I don't want to be the middle-aged man who looks himself in the mirror and wonders where the good-looking high school athlete went, deciding to run a marathon to cure his mid-life crisis. I don't want to be the person who takes the easy way out and never challenges himself. I don't want to be the person who lives an ordinary life. So I run away from it. All of it. I run away from becoming lazy. I run away from the guilt of not running. I run away from a bad race I had last weekend. I run away from becoming normal and ordinary. I run away from all of the things I don't like about myself. I run away from complacency.

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