

Ryan R. Shay
English 110
Prof. Leahy
10-39-97

American Distance Runners: Getting Lapped in the Fast Lane

My goal in life is to become an elite distance runner. I want to indulge in victory and be able to tell myself that I am the best at what I do. With this goal embedded in my thoughts, dreams, attitude, and character I am forced to look back upon United States distance runners and learn from the past. In studying the recent history of distance running, I have noticed that American distance runners have not progressed compared to foreign athletes. Each year world records are being set in distance events. None are being set by Americans. This lead me to analyze distance running in the U.S., and come to a conclusion on why American runners are "getting lapped in the fast lane," and whether or not, as an American, I stand a chance to compete at the world-class level.

There was a time when America male distance runners actually won big races. This was a time when distance runners were not in the awe of the Kenyans or other African runners. A time when a little known runner from the Army won the 10,000 meters (m) run at the 1964 Olympics. This little known runner was Billy Mills. He shocked the world in this event, beating the world record holder Ron Clark of Australia. Then, four days later, American

Bob Schul won the 5,000m with another American, Bill Dellinger, taking the bronze (Bloom 36). There was a time when Americans could run distance, but these are fading Olympic memories. The success did not last long. No American man has won an Olympic medal or World Championship medal in the 10,000m or 5,000m events since.

These days U.S. distance runners face a struggle of being unappreciated and having anonymity. They are overwhelmed by the speed and endurance of Kenyans, Algerians, Ethiopians, and various Europeans. In the 5,000m run the last U.S. medalist were Robert Schul (gold) and Bill Dillinger (bronze) in the 1964 Olympic Games (Track & Field 2). In the 1,500m run there has been no Olympic medal since Jim Ryun's silver in 1968. In the distances from the 1,500m to the marathon, U.S. men have won just two medals since 1972 - a silver by Frank Shorter in the 1976 marathon and a bronze by Brian Diemer in the steeplechase in 1984 (Baum 2).

These facts are enough to discourage many runners from pursuing such a dark, unsure path. Many distance runners feel inferior to African runners. They believe that they have no chance to compete in the future and allow their dreams to wither away. Runners begin to ask themselves why they should put forth the effort necessary to become an elite runner, when they do not stand a chance against their competitors. However, there does

seem to be a light that illuminates the path. This light is America's best hope for a distance medal in the next Olympics, Bob Kennedy. To analyze American runners, one must envision running through the eyes of Bob Kennedy. Kennedy holds the U.S. record for the 5,000m, 3,000m, and the 2 mile. He has proven time and time again that he can compete with African runners and that he possesses the potential to win an Olympic medal.

Kennedy has realized that Americans today are not performing well at the elite level. To allow himself to perform to the best of his abilities, he had decided to train with the masters of distance running. Two years ago during the summer track season, Kennedy trained with the Kenyans. Doing the same workouts that the Kenyans did, buoyed his confidence. While training with the Kenyans, Kennedy noticed many differences between African philosophies and lifestyles toward running and American running philosophies and lifestyles. "One of the reasons we haven't produced many world-class distance runners recently is I don't think Americans train hard enough," says Kennedy (Swift 36). Kennedy's training miles are similar to what many other Americans do, 90 to 95 miles a week. What sets him apart, and this is something that he learned from the Kenyans, is that he will run the miles more intensely and with more aggression than other U.S. runners. After a long hard season, Kennedy takes two months off which is another aspect of African runners.

Case Shay is another American runner who agrees with Kennedy. Shay is the only American on Lubbock Christian University's cross-country team. He has won the 1996 NAIA National Championship in the 3,000m steeplechase and has been part of Lubbock's National Championship cross-country team for the past three years while earning All-American honors. While training with the Africans on his team Shay says, "I believe that I have developed more as a runner coming to Lubbock. The Kenyans demonstrate a work ethic that is not present with many American runners." "One time I asked a Kenyan teammate how many 400m repeats we were going to do and he said 'until we're dead,'" continued Shay. The Kenyans live by a philosophy that says "nilan dika hasara" which briefly means whatever happens, happens; sacrifice and if you fail, you fail. This philosophy is remember by the Kenyans before every race. They will go out fast in a race and keep the pace this way. "This is the attitude that is different from the most American runners," says Shay. This is the attitude that helped develop Case Shay as a runner. Although there are many problems with American distance running at the elite level, the base of the problem lies at the high school level.

Many things high school runners do, or do not do, has an impact on the future of American Distance running. Most will not strive for excellence and victory. They will not run the extra

miles to become better. Most high school runners barely do what is required by their coaches. Especially for the young, distance running has lost its appeal in the United States. "The base coming out of high school isn't as good as it was twenty years ago," says University of Florida's head Track and Cross-country coach Doug Brown (Baum 1). Doug Brown is also a former Olympian and coach of America's number one 10,000m runner Todd Williams. In general, high school runners are not as willing to lay it on the line. They are not willing to work hard. High school runners today are out there more for the social reasons that to be good runners. To put it more bluntly, the youth of today are basically lazy, and distance running is a lot of hard work. A young runner could have all the talent in the world and nothing to show for it. "In distance running, if you don't work your butt off, talent isn't going to get you anywhere," says Olympian Bob Kennedy about high school runners (Baum 1).

There is a lack of motivation for high school runners. Those who do achieve as high school runners are very disciplined and hard-working individuals. Running in general lacks the prominence that other sports indulge in. Although an athlete such as Bob Kennedy is the best hope for a distance medal in the next Olympics, he is virtually unknown in the United States. Without the popularity, distance runners have to be self motivated. Many high school athletes (including runners) look up