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Fall Shoe Review

CHICKED: Why Aren't Men Keeping Pace in Event Participation?

New Runner Friendly Communities

Kimutai Cheruiyot (#7, Kenya) and Buzé Diriba (#9, Ethiopia) lead the Parkersburg News and Sentinel Half Marathon en route to becoming the RRCA Half Marathon champions for 2015.



Jeff Baughan

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A little more than 40 years ago, the prestigious Boston Marathon barred women from running. A little more than 30 years ago, women couldn't compete in the Olympics in any distance longer than 1500 meters.

To paraphrase those women's lib-oriented Virginia Slims ads, "We've come a long way, baby."

For the past two years, women comprised 57% of running event finishers. The margin hasn't been this wide since 2000, when men eclipsed women at 58%.¹

"In a way, we may have won the battle," says University of South Carolina exercise science professor Dr. Russ Pate, who also chairs the U.S. National Physical Activity Plan Alliance. "[The] sport clearly set off to make itself more attractive to women, and we succeeded."

To be fair, men still have a large presence. With the exception of 2014, when numbers dipped slightly, the number of male participants has increased each year. But women participate more.

With nearly 20 million Americans showing up for road races, our sport is thriving. The not-for-profit organization Outdoor Foundation reported running as the most popular activity for outdoor recreation in 2012.²

However, if participation trends continue to rise disproportionately, we'll face an ironic turn of the table. It's time to refocus, as a robust running community depends on equal participation. And at a time when nearly 70% of adult Americans are either overweight or obese,³ it's critical that more people, regardless of gender, participate in physical activity.

Title IX: The Game-Changer

To consider how to balance the ratio (keep in mind that according to the U.S. Census Bureau, women comprise about 51% of the population⁴), we must look at the first and second running booms.

Ryan Lamppa, researcher, media consultant, and Bring Back the Mile founder, cites Title IX, the legislation passed in 1972 that prohibited sex discrimination in any federally funded education program or activity, as the linchpin for women's running.

"Title IX allowed women and girls to participate in sports at the high school and collegiate level," says Lamppa. "It made it okay for women to sweat. Without Title IX we would not have these record participation numbers for women nor the number of running events in this country."

Title IX made it okay for women to sweat, but not many of them did. During the 1970s running boom, women comprised less than 20% of finishers. In 1990, that figure had only climbed to 25%.¹ But Title IX did create a ripple effect that continued into the second running boom, which exploded in the mid-1990s.

Move Over Bill Rodgers, Here Comes Oprah

Large training programs such as Team in Training (founded in 1988), national events such as Race for the Cure (1983) and the Rock 'n' Roll Series (1998), and the Internet, which made training plans more accessible, have ushered in a wave of new runners, both male and female. But it was media superstar Oprah Winfrey's 1994 Marine Corps Marathon that really inspired women to head out the door. In early 1995, *Runner's World* put her on the cover with the headline, "Oprah Did It, So Can You." Many women took that to heart.

"Oprah helped break down the stereotype that running isn't for big-boned people," says Lamppa. "Oprah will never have an ectomorphic body, but she's a runner, too. So she debunked that excuse, and thank you, Oprah, because that mindset change was very important, as it showed and inspired millions of people, men and women, that we all are runners regardless of body type."

This new crop of "I can do it too" runners tended to focus on participation, camaraderie, and completion rather than fierce competition. Events catered to women's needs with fun, family-friendly environments, music, and a festive finish line atmosphere. Women, generally social creatures who want to round up friends or family for a lively weekend outing, took to these events like bees to honey.

"Events [that] centered more on health and fitness, community, and fundraising got more women involved," says Lamppa. "They told their friends, and participation truly snowballed. Later, sharing on social media got even more women into sports."

To further encourage women's participation, companies and organizations launched women's-only events, leading to skyrocketing numbers. The Nike Women's Half Marathon in San Francisco (to be in 20 cities worldwide in 2015) attracted more than 25,000 runners last year. Disney's Princess and Tinker Bell Half Marathons welcomed about 24,000 and 16,000 runners, respectively.

Gary Westlund, a fitness instructor, coach, and race director for the Charities Challenge Series in Minnesota's Twin Cities, sees women's races as a positive force in that area. "These events have helped women recognize that they have an equal place on the starting line, on the podium, and in recognition. If it took women's-only races, running clubs, and programs to get to that point, it's working."

Shifting the Balance

Large-scale women's events have done wonders for participation numbers, but they only cater to one gender. Directors of coed events must remember that men, despite that cool exterior, need encouragement, acknowledgment, and peer support too.

"The most important thing that we can provide at our events is hospitality," says Westlund. "Men and women both want to be recognized. If we bring that *Cheers* TV show atmosphere to our running events, we'll see

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By Heather R. Johnson

more men come and come back, because somebody knows their name.”

Race directors should consider ways to tap into uniquely male characteristics, such as competitiveness, which running events naturally lend themselves to. The Men's Health Urbanathlon, an event that combines a road race with muscle-burning obstacles, welcomed nearly 2,000 participants to its San Francisco event last year, about 70% of them male.

Samantha Gattsek, a coach for Gotham City Runners in New York City, suggests holding events that weave in other sports and interests, such as races tied to local football or baseball teams. “In the winter New York Road Runners held a football-throwing contest after a local race,” she says. “That could have a big appeal.” That race, the Gridiron 4M, saw 5,051 participants this year, 2,577 of them men. The balance of male-to-female remained a pretty even split, even with the football toss.

Pate says that fundamental marketing principles don't vary by gender, but it could be time to conduct male participation-related focus groups. “Race organizers can ask themselves the same questions for men and women: What's going to make this event more enjoyable, more memorable, and bring them back next year?” Pate also sees the benefits in tying properly led group training runs to a race for added support.

While men plot their next move, women can help them get off the fence. “Particularly in families where the husband may have spent the past 20-some years involved in his career, having the wife or children encourage Dad to do that first mile or 5K goes a long way,” says Lamppa. “With the cost of health insurance and health care, more men take their health and fitness more seriously now than [they did] 5 or 10 years ago. Women can help reinforce that awareness, because they are well ahead of men on health and fitness and seeing the doctor.”

A study from the Commonwealth Fund showed that many men, more so than women, fail to get routine checkups and preventative care and often ignore symptoms of illness.⁵ Men also show higher rates of obesity and higher incidents of heart disease⁶—conditions helped by exercise.

“One thing's for sure: Regular running exerts an enormous positive effect on health. That's true in women and men, young and old,” says Pate. “We also know that selling health effects of physical activity in general is not enough. The most powerful influences are more proximal than that. Whether people continue to exercise regularly depends on whether it's accessible, whether they enjoy it, whether they are successful in the activity, and whether they have sufficient guidance to minimize injuries and maximize improvements in fitness.”

Start Young for Long-Term Success

The running community can provide the proximal benefits Pate mentions for adults as well as kids. Many active adults started as active kids; however, the number of youth aged 6–12 who participate in track & field declined by 13.7% from 2008 to 2013. Only 26.9% of youth participated in any activity three times a week.⁷ This means we must continue to expand and encourage gender-neutral youth programs such as RRCA's Kids Run the Nation.

“It's important to introduce kids to physical activity in a way that doesn't create a lot of pressure and stress,” says Pate. “We need to start by giving them positive experiences with activity and hope that it sticks.”

“Sports should provide young people with enjoyment, confidence, and ways to use a variety of motor skills,” says Dr. Jackie Epping, health scientist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She notes that a main reason young people drop out of sports is because it's not fun.

If we can encourage more people to walk and/or run and support men and women, boys and girls in their efforts, we will have made great improvements in our population's health while creating a more gender-balanced running community.

“When it comes down to it, most men just want to know how to be a better man,” says Westlund. “They want to know, ‘How can I do what I have to do for my family, my business, and for myself and always have the courage to keep going?’ That's what we learn in road racing.”

Heather Johnson is a writer based in Oakland, CA and a member of Pamakid Runners, a club formed in 1971 for men, women, and kids.

Sources

¹Running USA 2013 National Runner Survey.

²Outdoor Foundation, Outdoor Participation Report 2013.

³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Table 64. Healthy weight, overweight, and obesity among adults aged 20 and over, by selected characteristics: United States, selected years 1988–1994 through 2009–2012.

⁴United States Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Selected Age Groups by Sex for the United States, States, Counties, and Puerto Rico Commonwealth and Municipios: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2014.

⁵Sandman, D. R., Simantov, E., & An, C. (2000). Out of Touch: American Men and the Health Care System: Commonwealth Fund Men's and Women's Health Survey Findings. Commonwealth Fund.

⁶Blackwell, D. L., Lucas, J. W., Clarke, T. C. Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2012. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 10(260). 2014.

⁷Sports & Fitness Industry Association data provided to the Aspen Institute, based on 2013 statistics.



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