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Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Running Without a Narrative

By CAMERON STRACHER OCT. 30, 2009

IT'S been 27 years since an American man or woman has won the New York City marathon, and the streak is unlikely to be broken this Sunday. Indeed, since Alberto Salazar's victories in 1981 and 1982, only one American-born man, Ryan Hall, has managed to run faster than Salazar's 1981 finish of 2:08:13. While Salazar's time was a world record when he ran it, Hall's time (set in 2008 on a faster course at London, where he finished fifth) places him 36th on the list of top marathoners.

Some have blamed performance-enhancing drugs for the loss of American dominance on the roads; others have criticized United States training methods; still others see a shifting of interest to other sports, like lacrosse and soccer. But the real reason for the decline is a failure of narrative.

From the mid-'70s to the early '80s the United States was blessed with three great runners: Frank Shorter, Bill Rodgers and Alberto Salazar. Each held the No. 1 ranking at the marathon distance during that period. Their duels were legendary not only for their frequency and intensity, but also for the ink spilled about them.

The novelist Erich Segal provided television commentary for the Olympic marathons in 1972 and 1976, while the magazines Runner's World, Running Times and The Runner thrived during these years, publishing great writing about running by people like Hal Higdon, Joe Henderson, Kenny Moore, Amby Burfoot, George

Hirsch and John Parker, all of them elite runners themselves. They detailed Rodgers's and Shorter's battles on the roads in Lynchburg, Va., Atlanta and New York, and Rodgers's and Salazar's duel in the 7.1.-mile Falmouth Road Race in 1978, when Salazar collapsed in the heat and was administered last rites in the medical tent. In no small part, their writings inspired champions like Joan Benoit Samuelson (marathon), Craig Virgin (10,000 meters) and Steve Scott (mile).

As the running boom matured, however, the story line shifted from the race itself to the race as "event." In part, this reflected the changing demographic of the sport. But it also reflected a fear on the part of the storytellers that without the human-interest angle their audience would not "get it." (It's the same reason that every four years, in the Olympics, network executives tell us more about a Greco-Roman wrestler's triumph over cancer than about his triumph over his opponent. It's why the tale of, say, a spurned speed skater trumps the drama of athletic endurance.) Sports can be complex and unfathomable, and simple human stories are so much more accessible. They are also easier for the storytellers, who often have no particular expertise in the sport itself. The result, however, was that the story lost its grip on the next group of athletes who could have continued American marathon dominance into the '80s and '90s.

Today, pick up an article about the New York City marathon and you're as likely to read about a blind dog running with his septuagenarian master as you are a serious analysis of the race favorites. Even Runner's World, which actually used to write about races, is now full of articles about how to tighten your abs and sculpt your behind. Imagine if instead of writing about the Yankees-Phillies World Series, sportswriters focused their attention on the Yankee fan who organized a Wiffle ball game in his backyard. Yet that is essentially what happened to writing about running: it lost its narrative.

The marathon may be an event, but at its heart it is a race — a competition among highly trained athletes. A man who has never seen a baseball game couldn't possibly appreciate the beauty of the hit and run. But give him an understanding of the difficulty of connecting with a ball traveling at 95 miles per hour while another player is in motion as the ball is pitched, throw in all the nuances of the pitch count, the double play and the stolen base, and he might actually want to get out there and

take a few swings. Add a long-simmering rivalry, a curse, bad blood and betrayals, and you've got a national pastime that draws the most talented athletes to its fields.

Human-interest stories may tug our heartstrings, but only the drama of the race will produce the next generation of champion runners. Until then, it's blind dogs and septuagenarians in a mad dash to the finish.

Cameron Stracher, the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review, is writing a book about the running boom and the 1970s.

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