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The Slowest Generation

Younger Athletes Are Racing With Less Concern About Time

By KEVIN HELLIKER

Saying I finished in the top 15% of my age group in last month's Chicago Triathlon is like bragging that I could outrun your grandpa. My age group was 50 to 54.

But against the entire sprint-distance field, I finished in the top 11%. That's right: Team Geriatric outperformed the field.

I'd love to report that this reflects the age-defying effects of triathlon. But my hair is gray, my hearing is dull and my per-mile pace is slower than it used to be, even at shorter distances.

Rather, this old-timer triumph is attributable to something that fogies throughout the ages have lamented: kids these days.



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A lack of competitiveness among younger runners is turning some races into parades.

They're just not very fast. "There's not as many super-competitive athletes today as when the baby boomers were in their 20s and 30s," said Ryan Lamppa, spokesman for Running USA, an industry-funded research group. While noting the health benefits that endurance racing confers regardless of pace, Lamppa—a 54-year-old competitive runner—said, "Many new runners come from a mind-set where everyone gets a medal and it's good enough just to finish."

Now, a generational battle is raging in endurance athletics. Old-timers are suggesting that performance-related apathy among young amateur athletes helps

explain why America hasn't won an Olympic marathon medal since 2004.

Of the two Americans who won marathon medals that year, one—Deena Kastor, who is now 40—was the top finishing American woman at the marathon World Championships in Moscow last month. The other—38-year-old Meb Keflezighi—was the top American male finisher at the London Olympics marathon last year. Hunter Kemper, the 37-year-old winner of last month's Chicago Triathlon, remains arguably America's top triathlete as he aims for his fifth Olympics.

"Why isn't any younger athlete knocking them down a notch?" said Lamppa.

Some observers see larger and scarier implications in the declining competitiveness of young endurance athletes. "This is emblematic of the state of America's competitiveness, and should be of concern to us all," Toni Reavis, a veteran running commentator, wrote in a blog post this week entitled "Dumbing Down, Slowing Down."

Median U.S. marathon finishes for men rose 44 minutes from 1980 through 2011, according to Running USA, and last year nearly 75% of road-race finishers were 44 or younger, with 25- to 34-year-olds representing the largest age group.

Last month, Competitor Group Inc. announced it would no longer pay appearance fees for professional runners to compete at its Rock 'n' Roll marathon and half-marathon series in the U.S. CGI still pays travel expenses and more for the elite.

But to some observers, that change contributed to a growing embrace of mediocrity.

"If you're going to get just as much praise for doing a four-hour marathon as a three-hour, why bother killing yourself training?" asked Robert Johnson, a founder of LetsRun.com, adding that, "It's hard to do well in a marathon if your idea of a long session is watching season four of 'The Wire.'"

But instead of fighting back, the young increasingly are thumbing their nose at the very concept of racing. Among some, it simply isn't cool, an idea hilariously illustrated in a 2007 YouTube Video called the Hipster Olympics. In those Games, contestants do anything to avoid crossing the finish line—drink beer, lounge in the grass, surf the Web.

Yet something remotely akin to that is happening. Perhaps the fastest-growing endurance event in the country, the Color Run, doesn't time participants or post results. "Less about your 10-minute mile and more about having the time of your life, The Color Run is a five-kilometer, un-timed race," says its website.

Then there is Tough Mudder, a fast-growing series of obstacle-course challenges that proudly dispenses with an endurance-racing staple: the results page. "Since Tough Mudder is an event, not a race, we do not post the finish times on our site," says the Tough Mudder website. Arguing that results pages detract from camaraderie, Tough Mudder adds that obsessing about finish times is "lame."

That idea sounds downright un-American to Joe Desena, founder of the rival Spartan Race obstacle-course series. His competitors are timed and their results posted, with many aspiring to earn a slot in the Spartan World Championship this weekend. Likening to communism events that promote "hand-holding over competition," Desena said, "How well is that everybody-gets-a-trophy mentality working in our schools?"

Desena also contends that eliminating timing chips and results pages is a sure way to increase profit—while shielding one's customers' names from competitors. For Spartan, the cost of tracking and posting performances is significant, he says. "If you can pull the wool over your customers' eyes and convince them that communism is better, you can drop at least \$40,000 to your bottom line every race," he said.

Of course, there are countless super-elite young athletes. And only because the young have no need to prove they're not old was I able to outrace so many of them last month. Still, apathetic competition offers little comfort to some aging athletes.

After finishing last month's Virginia Beach half marathon in the top 2% of the 50-54 age group, Brendan Reilly was shocked to find he'd made the top 1% of the overall field—despite running 27 minutes slower than the personal best he'd set more than two decades earlier.

"I wasn't thrilled," said Reilly, a sports agent in Boulder, Colo., adding that "races are turning into parades."

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