

RUNNER'S WORLD

To Run Faster, Get a Rival

Results analysis finds runners race faster when familiar rivals are present.

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If you've done an out-of-town race and run slower than usual, it's logical to attribute your subpar result to travel fatigue, unfamiliar food or jet lag. But it could be you weren't motivated to push as hard because none of your familiar rivals were in the race, new research suggests.

Gavin Kilduff, an associate professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, conducted runner surveys and pored through years of race results to answer this question: Do we race faster when one or more people we regularly finish near are in the race? The short answer is yes, by almost 5 seconds per kilometer, according to Kilduff's analysis, which was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Kilduff started by asking 72 members of a running club if they had at least one running rival; 57 percent said they did. Among runners who had raced at least five times in the last year, just more than three-quarters said they had at least one rival. Those who did claimed to have rivals had an average of just fewer than three.

Kilduff asked those with rivals the open-ended question, "Do you have any thoughts about how rivalry affects you?" Just more than two-thirds gave some form of answer indicating that racing rivals motivate them to push harder in a race; some even offered that thinking about rivals motivated them to train harder.

To see if race results supported these claims, Kilduff looked at results for 82 people from 74 races held between 2004 and 2006, at distances from 3 kilometers to the half marathon. (Most were 5Ks.) He identified pairs of rivals, which he defined as being similar in age and gender, running many of the same races, and finishing near each other in those races.

Once he had identified the rivalries, Kilduff looked at the runners' results from 112 races held between 2007 and 2009. As already noted, Kilduff found that having at least one rival resulted in running faster. He found his subjects raced even faster when more than one rival was present, when the person he pegged as a runner's chief rival was in the race, and when his subjects raced people they had faced over many years.

Kilduff writes that his findings aren't just identifying training partners doing a race together, and therefore appearing to be rivals when they're not. The

average margin of finishing time between the runners he identified as rivals was 9 seconds per kilometer, and 5 seconds per kilometer for a runner's top rival. "This would seem close enough to incite rivalry—perhaps via examination of the final results as well as by visual identification while racing—but not so close as to suggest dyads literally running together," Kilduff writes.

"How we behave in competition situations depends on our relationship and history of interaction with our opponent," Kilduff says in a press release accompanying his research. "This suggests that we may be able to boost our own levels of motivation and performance by either forming rivalries or harnessing the ones we already have."