

RUNNER'S WORLD

Are Runners Ever Guilty of Excessive Celebration?

The psychological makeup of long-distance athletes is at odds with finish-line antics.

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Every 10 years or so, I'll sit through part of a football game, usually the Super Bowl. From ages ago I remember a dude who scored a touchdown and did a cute little dance. It was called, eponymously, the Ickey Shuffle.

Recently I learned that the powers running football have cracked down and found a need to regulate "excessive celebrations." (I love this term almost as much as I adore the phrase "unnecessary roughness.") Part of me rejoices to see young men going all Walt Whitman and singing the body electric; it's hard to remain unmoved as a witness to unrestrained delight, though I know the problem comes not so much from the "Go me!" part as from the ensuing implication: "You suck!"

Perhaps the reason I was enchanted by the idea of having to regulate revelries is because, as a marathoner, I could not imagine this becoming a problem in our sport. Sure, some sprinters may get a bit obstreperous when they nail a race, but even were marathoners not too tired at the end of a race to dance, something in the psychological makeup of a distance runner seems at odds with excessive celebrating. We often suffer a well-developed sense of self-criticism. You can win a race and not be happy with your time. You can have a great time and still not finish well.

Plus, we are not team players. "We won!" celebrates the team. "I won!" makes you sound like an a-hole. A double fist-pump is the most expressive many distance runners get in victory, and even then, there's usually few people to see that—they're all still on the course.

Recently I asked friends if they could imagine a runner getting dinged for excessive celebration. Immediately someone said, "On Facebook, when people trumpet not only their good races but their daily training runs!" Someone else claimed she quit social media because of that. No matter what she'd done, seeing triumphant announcements from others made her feel bad about herself.

Right, I thought. For those of us who wax jealous and self-hatey, any day someone achieves something that I haven't—even going out for a 10-mile run—it seems to diminish me, at least in my own petty eyes.

It doesn't. It's not like they're bragging; they're reporting. The pissyness of my

response depends on who's doing the posting. If it's someone I like or don't know, no problem. But when people I feel competitive with achieve something impressive, I want to comment, "Bite me." Of course, I'm often guilty of the same thing: posting on Facebook after an epic adventure with friends or photographing an age-group award and trying to collect likes.

Don't my online friends hate me for such self-indulgent, self-celebratory acts? Wouldn't I hate me? Probably. I remember coming home from New York on a weekend that coincided with the marathon and sneering at people in the airport brandishing their finisher's medals. It was like a party everyone had been invited to—except me. Wearing hard-earned hardware isn't excessive, just as slapping a 13.1 or 26.2 sticker on your car shouldn't seem obnoxious. But it can strike me that way. (She says after admitting to posting an award photo.)

The rewards from running are many and varied, but among them are not large amounts of sustained applause. At most small races, by the time the awards are handed over, everyone's packed up and gone home. If you don't post a photo of it on Facebook, who will know? What's wrong with displaying a finisher's medal for an airport stroll? Is it any worse than sporting a race shirt? We each get to figure out how much cheering we require and get it where we can.

I've stopped wearing the giant Timex Ironman watch that announced to those in the know that I was a runner. I don't need it—I have a cellphone and a Garmin—but I miss the understated way it marked me as a member of the tribe.

About the author: Rachel Toor's most recent book is a novel about running, On the Road to Find Out. She also teaches writing at Eastern Washington University in Spokane.