

# Just Joe

Joe Henderson's career has helped define the sport.

BY RICH ENGLEHART

It is 1970. You're a college freshman running for a very mediocre cross-country team. As a high school runner, you were even less than mediocre. But for some odd reason, you really liked running and decided that you wanted to keep doing it in college. You managed to find a school that wasn't too far from home, that wasn't too expensive, and that was, well, bad enough that it was happy to let anyone run who wanted to.

Your training is similar to what you did in high school, virtually all of it repeat work done on the track, but much more intense. You frequently lose your lunch beneath the bleachers and often cannot finish the entire session. You're last man on the team and you know that if this state of affairs persists, you're likely to fall further behind the rest of the team. You start to look for something better.

You began getting *Track & Field News* a few months ago, and in one issue, you see an advertisement for a book called *Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train*. The ad claims that "training doesn't have to be a pain." You would like to buy the book, but it's beyond your price range. But in a later edition of *T&FN* you see another ad, this time for a magazine called *Distance Running News*. Back issues are advertised. One of the back issues has an article titled "Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train," written by the same author as the book with that title. The back issue is cheaper than the book. You order it.

The article tells of three runners who train at seven to eight minutes per mile and race much, much faster. You haven't heard of any of them, and their times are not world class. (Amby Burfoot, who was well known and had produced world-class times while training slowly, was profiled in the book but not in the magazine article.) But they're very fast. You would be thrilled to run nearly as well as any of them.

This sort of training is a radical departure from what is normal for the times. You've been taught that training needs to be hard to be effective, and you're skeptical that having an easy, comfortable run on most or all days can get you fit enough to run at a five- or six-minute pace. But you've been looking for something else, something different, something that the other guys on your team aren't do-

ing, and you think, “Heck, if I train slowly, how much slower can I be than I am now?” As a Christmas present, your parents buy you the book.

Throughout the winter you do a six- to 15-mile run each day. It’s not easy, but it’s much easier than interval work. It’s more satisfying as well to cover distances regularly that once seemed so imposing.

When track season starts, you find that you aren’t the slowest distance runner on the team anymore. You’re second slowest, but you’re beating someone whom you could not beat the previous autumn. Your best mile time is slow, but it is more than a half minute faster than you ran in high school. You continue to train this way over the summer. Come fall, you improve your time for your home cross-country course by more than three minutes and crack the varsity seven. You get to run in the big late-season meets.

## Who should take the credit?

By graduation you have taken an additional five and a half minutes off your best time for your home cross-country course. Your time is more than a minute faster than the school record for the course had been when you arrived, though others have run even faster since your arrival at the school. After graduation, you continue to run and to race. Eventually you run a marathon at a faster per-mile pace than you ran for one mile in high school. Almost 40 years later, you are still running semiseriously. Your oldest son has taken up the sport and is doing quite well, in part because you’re able to guide his training. You think that maybe some of your love and enthusiasm for the sport has rubbed off on him. You reflect on the people who have influenced you and made the sport into such a tremendous experience. You know there are several but perhaps none to whom you are more indebted than “Mr. LSD, Joe Henderson.”

Joe, not Joseph, Henderson was born in June 1943 to Jim and Virginia Henderson in Peoria, Illinois. Jim was old enough to fight in World War II but was at home because he had failed his draft physical. So he spent the war raising his family and editing a magazine for hog farmers. In 1946, Jim declared he was “tired of chasing deadlines” and traded his editor’s job for one on his father’s hog farm in Coin, Iowa. The Henderson hogs did not end up on someone’s plate. They went to hog shows and bred offspring that ended up on someone’s plate. “Dad didn’t send the pigs to market. He was too kindhearted and weak stomached for that. Instead, he sold the hogs as breeding stock to farmers who wanted to upgrade their herds. Henderson Farm built its reputation for high-quality stock by winning at hog shows.”

Young Joe spent some of his childhood developing aerobic fitness by chasing hogs in the same way that young Kenyans develop their aerobic fitness by chasing goats and cattle.



Courtesy of Joe Henderson

▲ Young Joe's first "winning"—as a showman of pigs, in 1953 (at age 10), with his dad, brother Mike, and grandfather.

“Pigs go where they choose and at their own speed. When they sense they are about to be ill used—such as being loaded for show, sale, or slaughter—they balk or bolt.

“With my 10th birthday, I gained eligibility to travel the fairs circuit with Dad and my brother Mike. I also earned the decidedly less glamorous duty of joining them in farm work. If the fairs were the ‘races,’ the daily labor was the ‘training.’”

The Henderson family shared an interest in the sport of track and field. Jim's older brother, Chuck, was a sprinter at Iowa State University and was part of a 4 × 220 relay team that set an indoor world record in 1931. In 1932, Chuck qualified for the US Olympic Trials at 400 meters but could not afford to attend. In 1933, Chuck set a field-house record for Iowa State at a quarter mile that would stand until 1963 and ran the 440 leg on a team that won the distance medley relay at the Drake Relays, earning Chuck a coveted Drake Relays wristwatch. Chuck's best time for the 440 was 48.6 at a time when the world record was 47.2.

Jim was also a successful high school sprinter and long jumper, but his achievements were no match for his brother's. But Jim retained a lifelong interest in the sport. Attending the Drake Relays became an annual ritual for the Hendersons.

In 1954, Joe managed to get an autograph from Wes Santee when Santee was in pursuit of the first sub-four-minute mile and had just won the Drake Relays mile. A few weeks later, Jim would bring Joe the news of Roger Bannister's successful attempt at the four-minute mile, prompting Joe to measure out a one-mile course where he would attempt to run the distance in under eight minutes.

“Bannister prompted me to try running a mile for time. I thought it would be neat to run it in less than twice his time. After all, I was half his weight and, at almost 11, less than half his age.”

He ran 7:23. But formal competition in the sport would have to wait as young Joe waded into the world of organized sports in the way that most American boys do. Coin High School fielded teams in the sports that were common to US high schools at the time: football, basketball, and track.

## Too small for 11

Enrollment was too small at Coin High School to field an 11-man football team, so it fielded a six-man team and then an eight-man team. The games were played on a slightly narrower and shorter field than the 11-man version used. The small number of players creates a game that is faster and more open than the 11-man version. Speed and quickness matter as much as or more than size. Perhaps the highlight of Joe's football career was an intercepted pass that he returned for a touchdown. But at 5 feet, 6 inches and 140 pounds, Joe was never a threat for a Heisman Trophy. His size also made basketball an unlikely venue for success, but in the spring he went out for track. The track coach, Dean Roe, was also the football and basketball coach. On the first day of track practice, he sent the team for a run around town, a mile. Joe ran 5:51 and was the first finisher, earning a spot in the mile for the team's first dual meet.

“Running was the great equalizer. Here, size didn't matter. Here, skill counted for less than will. Here, I could win and keep winning—or so I thought.” In his first high school track meet, Joe ran his first lap in 69 seconds, equaling his fastest time for the distance. It was too much, and his first official race ended with a DNF. Joe's reaction, not an atypical one for a high schooler, was to give up the sport. Coach Roe reminded Joe that he had put some time and effort into coaching Joe and that Joe owed him at least a complete race before he left the team. Better pacing in his second race led to a 5:25 and a midpack finish. It was a big improvement and a thoroughly unspectacular result, but Joe, like so many others who would find their way to competitive running, found that he loved the satisfaction of doing better than he had done previously. He had found his sport. That winter Joe gave up basketball so that he could begin training for track sooner, in January. That was unheard of at the time. Joe ran after school and “ran one or two miles a day. But this was still longer than I'd gone the year before.”

But Coin High School's days were numbered. At the end of the 1959 school year, it merged and became part of a new school, South Page High. South Page started a cross-country team. Boys were expected to play football, but five boys were recruited for the cross-country team. Joe ran in the mornings before school, went to football practice, and ran in cross-country meets. There were only three of these: two losses in dual meets, but a first-place team finish at the state meet. Joe was the team's top placer in third.

At 140 pounds, he had been a somewhat useful football player in the six- to eight-man versions of the game. But South Page, a much bigger school, played the 11-man game. It was harder for a 140-pound player to have an impact, and now Joe was no longer a 140-pound player. Running had dropped his weight to 125 pounds. But his enthusiasm for his new sport grew. Runs lengthened to four miles, the length of the Midwestern farmer's "block" where roads intersected each other at 90 degree angles every mile. That spring he was fourth in the high school mile at the Drake Relays, running against competition from various high school divisions, and then won the Class B mile at the Iowa High School Championships.

The next autumn he won the state cross-country championship and repeated as Class B mile champion the following spring. An uncle had given Joe a subscription to *Track and Field News* and then another to a new running magazine called *Long Distance Log*. The Rome Olympics provided heroes, and the magazines provided some insight into how those heroes prepared. Max Truex did better in the 10,000 meters than any other US Olympian had done previously. Joe learned that Truex had trained on a considerable amount of interval work under Hungarian expatriate Mihaly Igloi and experimented with that sort of training.



Courtesy of Joe Henderson

► Joe winning the Iowa State High School Cross-Country meet in 1960.

Then Joe read about the training that New Zealanders Peter Snell, Murray Halberg, and Barry Magee did under Arthur Lydiard. Joe was intrigued by this high-volume approach. The 100-mile weeks that the Kiwis were running seemed beyond him, so he decided that he would run half as much, perhaps the flip side of his one-time goal of running a mile in twice the time that Roger Bannister had done. That worked out to about seven or eight miles a day, the distance from South Page High to the Hendersons' home. The school bus left about two hours after the end of the school day because nearly all of the students were involved in sports or in other extracurricular activities. Joe often gave his books and bag to his sister, who rode the bus each day, and he ran home.

## Getting home under his own power

"I did this run a few days each week, a bit over eight miles. On other days I ran a similar distance." Colleges took notice, and Joe was recruited by a number of schools in Iowa, Illinois, and Nebraska. He accepted a full scholarship from Drake University with vague plans to major officially in either education or journalism. "But," he admits, "my real plan was major in running." Economics had brought changes and new experiences to the Henderson family. The farm in Coin struggled financially. Jim had sold a hog to a farm in the distant suburbs of Chicago. While delivering the hog, he learned that the farm it would live on needed a manager. He took the job, but most of the Hendersons remained in Coin. Joe moved with his dad to Lake Bluff, Illinois, intending to attend high school there.

But he felt like a fish out of water and moved back to the family home in Coin for the school year while summering with his dad in Illinois. This allowed Joe to run in all-comers' meets put on throughout the summer by the University of Chicago Track Club. He raced against near Olympians like Hal Higdon, who had missed the 1960 US Olympic team in the steeplechase by two places, and future Olympians like Mike Manley, who would make the 1972 US Olympic team in the same event. But he also raced against unknown runners like Arne Richards, who worked as a librarian at Kansas State University and never came close to making any Olympic team but loved the sport and participated in it because he wanted to. At some point, Joe decided that he wanted to be someone who never "retired" from the sport.

After her son graduated from South Page High School, Joe's mother took a job as a secretary at Drake. Jim left his job in Illinois and rejoined the family in Des Moines. The Hendersons—well, Joe's branch of the family—left Coin for good. Joe moved into a dorm, his parents found a house, and Joe began his collegiate career after adding three more Iowa state titles to his high school running resume.

Collegiate running can be very different from high school running. Much is given. Much is expected.

“Running had always perked me up before. Now it left me more exhausted and irritable. This wasn’t running as I’d known it. I’d never before taken a whole run on concrete, never run on streets with stoplights, never faced such traffic, never heard hecklers, never felt unwelcome.”

Workouts were intense and consistently made up of interval work. Joe struggled. He missed the steady four-mile runs around Coin and the eight-mile runs that brought him home from his high school. The harder work did not produce faster times. Joe wanted to keep running but not in the way he had as a college freshman. At the end of his freshman year, he negotiated a deal with his coach, Bob Karnes. He would give up his scholarship and train on his own but continue to run for Drake. His mother’s job at the school meant that his tuition was free, scholarship or not. His mom and dad’s house gave him a place to live. A short time with no running during the summer following his freshman year convinced him that he “never wanted to stop again.”

Looking at this period of time decades later, one senses that the adult Joe Henderson who will make his living by telling people that running for whatever reason is a good thing is almost ready. Others who ran in that era might consider Joe’s ultimate goal, to keep running simply to keep running, unusual. One ran in those days to attain some sort of result: an Olympic berth or a spot on another national team, a college scholarship, a four-minute mile, to get in “shape” for basketball season. Kenneth Cooper, Arthur Lydiard, and Bill Bowerman had not yet written about the health benefits of jogging. And Joe’s decision to continue in the sport indefinitely regardless of results was not the result of considerations



Courtesy of Joe Henderson

▲ The Drake track team in 1965, Joe’s senior year (Joe is front row, far right).

relating to health. Karnes was perhaps puzzled by the request, but he allowed it. “Your problem is that you like running too much,” Joe was told.

## His writing career begins

Joe’s four years at Drake were not spectacular. His mile time improved to 4:18, a slight improvement over his high school best. He ran in NCAA cross-country championships, finishing in the middle of the pack. He graduated and became an adult runner who had secured a newspaper job with the *Des Moines Register*. By this time, Joe had done more writing than the average college graduate. As a high schooler, he had covered high school sports for the (Shenandoah) *Evening Sentinel*, the same newspaper that carried columns written by his mother. He had also begun keeping a training diary, but the diary had expanded to cover a somewhat wider range of topics than his training and racing.

The job with the *Register* required working nights and weekends. Mondays and Tuesdays became the weekend. Running was done before work. It was hot and humid on August 18, 1966, when Joe set off for Drake Stadium planning to do a session of three repeats of 1,000 meters. He struggled before exhaustion set in. “Getting up and going home right then would have required more energy than I had,” Joe would write later. So he sat in the infield pondering his relationship with running. His best mile time had slowed by 26 seconds in the preceding two years despite ambitious and difficult training.

His reading had expanded as time went on. In addition to reading about the easy paced runs that Lydiard’s athletes did, he had read articles in *Track Technique*, a quarterly publication for coaches published by *Track & Field News*, about a West German coach and medical doctor named Ernst van Aaken who had coached Harald Norpoth to the silver medal at 5,000 meters at the previous Olympics. Van Aaken’s athletes ran easy efforts with only small amounts of pace and speed work. Joe had also read *Commonsense Athletics* by Arthur Newton, perhaps the world’s greatest ultramarathoner to date. Newton also advocated a high-volume, low-intensity approach to training. Joe had always preferred that sort of running. Many of his best memories of running were of the steady four-mile runs around the block or of the eight-mile runs that had brought him home from school. He had once been convinced that he needed harder and faster runs to race as fast as possible. But on that day, the fast racing seemed a memory. What was real was the physical discomfort in the legs as well as the overall discomfort of the incomplete session. What would happen if he simply stopped training hard and fast and instead ran comfortably each day, saving the hard efforts for races? If everything he had been told was correct, he might race even slower than he was now. But so what? Most running happens out of competition. Might it not be worth sacrificing a few seconds per mile from his racing performances if it meant

that each day's running would be enjoyable? And perhaps the racing would not slow that much. The ideas from van Aaken, Lydiard, and Newton suggested that he might improve, though that was not going to be the goal.

"I decided that I was already racing so slowly that it couldn't get that much slower if all of my training was slow and easy." On August 19, 1966, Joe embarked on what might be considered a new running career. Racing well would be fine, but the goal was simply to continue in the sport indefinitely and enjoyably. He worked his way back toward the 50-mile weeks he had run in high school, running at seven or eight minutes per mile.

## Racing performances did not decline

Slow training produced only one slight PR, a one-second improvement at 10,000 meters. But his times at all distances improved markedly from what they had been immediately prior to the switch.

A few weeks later at the AAU 15-kilometer championship in St. Paul, Minnesota, Joe met Ed Winrow, a New Yorker who had done graduate work in exercise physiology at Ball State University, and was one of the better road racers in the US at the time. His best marathon was only 2:34, but he excelled at intermediate distances and would miss the US Olympic marathon team in 1968 by only two places.

"He told me he'd been training an hour a day with one two-hour run each week at 7:30 to 8:00 per mile." On that day, Winrow dispelled any notions Joe might have had that slow training could lead only to slow racing.

"Chin hanging in disbelief," he would later write, "I watched (Ed) reel off mile after mile at 5:00 pace." At the time, Joe was writing for a newsletter called *Iowans on the Run*. His first written piece about long, slow distance training appeared there, explaining his switch to slower training and the success Ed Winrow was having with it.

## On to *Track & Field News*

Shortly afterward, the West Coast came calling. At the time, California was one of the running meccas in the US. Most major outdoor track meets and at least three major indoor meets in the US were held in California. Road racing, a sport in its infancy, was becoming popular there. *Track & Field News*, the most authoritative and comprehensive publication about the sport, was published in Los Altos. During a summer break from Drake, Joe had taken a Greyhound bus to this mecca. While visiting the offices of *Track & Field News*, Joe found the staff shorthanded and was hired on the spot for a summer job. At summer's end, he had turned down an offer to remain permanently in order to return to school.

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But now he was again offered full-time employment at the “Bible of the Sport” and this time accepted.

By 1967, Joe was a Californian and a *T&FN* staffer immersed in the growing road racing culture of the San Francisco Bay area. He befriended a local runner, photographer, and architect named Jeff Kroot. Kroot was no thoroughbred, but he loved running and racing though he could break neither 10 minutes for two miles nor four hours for the marathon. Joe told Jeff about his slow-paced training. Kroot saw little merit to the idea but eventually switched to slow training in response to persistent injury problems. The results were positive and dramatic. His two-mile went from 10:12 to 9:55, his marathon from 4:07 to 2:50, and he made corresponding improvements at all other distances.

In addition to his work at *Track & Field News*, Joe also wrote for a small magazine devoted to distance running called *Distance Running News* that was published by Bob Anderson, an undergraduate at Kansas State University. The success that he, Winrow, and Kroot had with slow training inspired Joe to write an expanded version of his article about slow training from *Iowans on the Run* called “Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train,” which was published in 1969 in *Distance Running News*. Kroot was acquainted with Bob Deines, a young distance runner from Southern California who at the time ran for Occidental College. Deines was a true thoroughbred with two sixth-place finishes in the Boston Marathon, a fourth-place finish at the 1968 Olympic Trials Marathon, and a best time of 2:20:48, who would go on to set a US record at 50 miles.

Deines was, for lack of a better term, his own man. Some might have called him a hippie, though his devotion to running belied the term. He wore his hair long. He raced in tie-dyed shirts. He questioned the “winning is all that matters” mentality that pervades competitive sports. He argued with his college coach over training methods because the coach wanted him to work out with the team doing hard and fast work on the track and Deines ran on his own, comfortably, each morning. His routine evolved to a daily two-hour run at roughly eight minutes per mile with a longer run, two and a half to three hours, each weekend. Deines was interested in the ideas and writings of Jack Scott, the leftist “athletic reformer” who would eventually become athletic director at Oberlin College in Ohio and who later would drive Patty Hearst and the remnants of the Symbionese Liberation Army from California to Pennsylvania. Jeff Kroot was acquainted with both Scott and Deines and arranged a meeting.

“Jeff was more of a connector than I ever was,” Joe would say. Yet he and Deines were to connect very well. Deines drove through the night after racing three miles in 14:03 on the track in Los Angeles and was looking for running partners the next day. Kroot arranged a two-hour run with himself, Deines, the late Ralph Paffenbarger (a medical doctor whose research would prove that distance running lengthens the human life span), and Joe Henderson, none of whom were

in Deines's class as distance runners. Yet as they set off, Joe got the impression that Deines was worried the others would go faster than he wanted to.

“In response to (Deines's) ‘how far,’ someone said ‘just a comfortable two hours in the hills.’ Deines replied, ‘That sounds good’ with what sounded like relief . . . Bob was Kenyan before there were Kenyans. He started each run off at a slow, almost stumbling pace. But unlike today's Kenyans, he didn't pick the pace up very much.”

The two hours spent running and talking with Deines convinced Joe that slow training was as likely to produce racing success as any other method. But he was at least as impressed with Deines's love for the sport and his desire to run even though he had been awake all night and was drained from his hard race.

“Conditions for (Deines) were far from ideal,” Joe would explain, “with hangover-like feelings from a three-miler race in Los Angeles the night before and an all-night drive to the Bay Area. But he seemed genuinely to want to run. It wasn't an ‘I've *got* to run even though it's the last thing I want to do’ sort of thing.”

## Expanding ideas to book length

Joe's article in *Distance Running News* had drawn attention, comments, and questions. Ed Fox, the *Track & Field News* book editor, had been suggesting that Joe might want to expand the LSD article into a book. The run with Deines convinced Joe that he should.

“That run, more than anything else, convinced me that there was value to the idea of slow training.”

He found two more runners—Amby Burfoot, winner of the Boston Marathon in 1968, and Tom Osler, a national champion at 25 and 30 kilometers—who had done very well while training slowly and wrote profiles on each of them, along with a profile of Deines. He added those profiles to those of Winrow, Kroot, and himself and sandwiched the profiles between introductory and concluding chapters. In 1969, all 64 pages of *Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train*, was published by Track & Field News Press.

The book (*LSD*) was published at the end of the psychedelic '60s, and the initials in the title were sometimes taken as a drug reference. But the inspiration for the title was not some flaky, drug-related reference, nor was it all that original.

“I got the idea from a reference Browning Ross wrote in *Long Distance Log*. He'd mentioned something about long, slow distance-type training.”

The book was not a big seller, but it made as big a splash as any other running book ever had. While few runners bought it, most of those who did seem to have lent it to at least three or four running friends. And everyone who read it discussed it, summarized it, and analyzed it with their running friends. It seemed that one

could categorize distance runners in one of three ways: those who thought the idea of racing fast by training slowly was completely wrong, those who thought the idea of racing fast by training slowly had some merit but were not willing to try it themselves, and those who thought it was a great idea and set off to do it.

By 1969, the running world was changing. More people were taking up the sport, though no one could have imagined that race fields would reach the size of today's races. More and more people who had no chance of making a national team or contending for a national championship were taking up or remaining in the sport. Training, which had mostly been done at or near race paces and generally on the track, was moving onto roads, parks, trails, golf courses, and so on. Arthur Lydiard may have begun this trend. But his ideas, his hundred-mile weeks followed by hard running over hills and on tracks, seemed to apply to the aspiring champion. *LSD*, on the other hand, seemed a new animal. It wasn't jogging for health. Kenneth Cooper had explained how to do that, and the runners profiled in *LSD* ran much more than Cooper recommended. But it wasn't an all-out, win-or-die approach either.

Yes, racing success was a goal, but it was a goal compromised by an overriding desire to enjoy the sport. It advanced the hypothesis that only a small percentage of your running comes in races. Most of our running is done as training, so maybe what we should do is make sure that we enjoy that training. The means to the end perhaps becomes the end, and what had been the end previously, racing success, became a by-product.

People understood *LSD*. People misunderstood *LSD*. Critics emerged claiming that the idea would ruin competitive running in the US because it replaced carefully structured training with "aimless jogging." One critic called the idea a "fraud" because it led people to believe that they could get "something for nothing." In the book, Dave Littlehales, a nonprofiled, slow-training runner of undetermined accomplishments is quoted. "Since I have come over to slow training, running has been a new thing in my life. Rather than a time for anxiety, running has been transformed to my recreation, the bright light in my day."

Where would running be today without *LSD*? A runner who has taken up the sport in the last 40 years, since the idea of comfortably paced training has become popular, might have a difficult time understanding how running could have been a time for anxiety. But it's hard to imagine the millions of people who run today doing so if running meant going to the track for a series of short repeats that needed to be done in a specific and demanding time. Arguably, the sport as we know it would not exist if someone hadn't written *Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train*, or something like it.

The book and its impact on Joe was the opening piece of a lifetime's writing that elaborates the same theme.

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“So what you’re saying,” he replies, “is that I’ve been writing the same book for 40 years?” Then he says, “Guilty as charged.”

Despite low sales, *LSD* brought a change to Joe’s writing and to his life. Bob Anderson, publisher of *Distance Running News*, moved to California, to neighboring Mountain View, and wanted to hire an editor so that he could concentrate on publishing his growing magazine. He also wanted an editor who could, Joe adds, “keep the magazine running in case Bob was drafted,” something which both men avoided—by joining the Army Reserve in Joe’s case, and by getting a high lottery number in Bob’s. Eventually the magazine would come out monthly, twice as frequently as it previously was published. Anderson offered the job to Joe, who took a cut from his already small salary in order to work for a magazine that wrote only about distance running.

Joe’s writing changed as well. Prior to writing *LSD*, he had been a reporter writing features and interviews with other figures in the sport. After *LSD*’s release, his writing became more subjective and experiential. He became a promoter of the idea of long slow distance training and of the sport of distance running itself. This sort of promoting meant making the sport seem more accessible to the masses. It meant minimizing the pain and inconvenience that had traditionally been part of the sport. For every Steve Prefontaine who ran to “see who has the most guts,” there were now dozens, perhaps hundreds, and eventually thousands who ran because it felt like a good thing to do at least some of the time.

Anderson cast around for a new name for the magazine, eventually settling on *Runner’s World*. The first issue spelled out the magazine’s philosophy.

“We’d rather have 50,000 people running a mile in seven minutes than have 50,000 people sitting in a stadium watching one person run a mile in 3 minutes, 50 seconds.”

Someone looking for the moment the modern form of the sport was born might consider it to have happened when those words were printed. Television ratings for the sport have dropped in the past 40 years. So have the number of spectators at track meets. The circulation of *Track & Field News* has remained stable during that time, while *Runner’s World* has a current circulation of 650,000, up from 2,000 in 1970.

## The evolution of the runner

Nearly all of those 650,000 people are active runners. Many would struggle even to run that seven-minute mile. Others run multiple marathons in a year. Many, perhaps most, of those readers could not name a single sub-3:50 miler. They don’t watch televised track meets or road races except perhaps the Olympics. If they run in a race, many are likely to leave without knowing their finishing place or the names of the overall winners.

A recent conversation with a cousin who had graduated from health runner to “just finish” marathoner after his first marathon produced the following exchange:

“How do you feel?”

“Good.”

“What was your time?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did you place?”

“I don’t know.”

It would be difficult for a long-term runner not to conclude that *Runner’s World’s* goal has been achieved.

The message has remained constant over the decades: running is a good and pleasurable thing to do. You will have a better life for doing it than for not doing it, and Joe will try to find ways to get and keep you involved. “We’d rather have 50,000 people running a mile in seven minutes than have 50,000 people sitting in a stadium watching one person run a mile in 3 minutes, 50 seconds” was the editorial statement, and it obviously took hold.

As an editor, most of the writing Joe worked with was that of other people. But his own writing, growing more experiential and subjective, was a regular feature of *Runner’s World*. The title of his next book, *Run Gently, Run Long*, suggested a sequel to *LSD* to at least some readers. But it was no *Son of Long Slow Distance*. There were no athletes profiled and no suggestions about how to train. It was reflective and personal. It was, like its predecessor, short.

Racing was an almost weekly event for Joe by then. *Runner’s World* in those days organized a Midnight Run of 10 kilometers to start each new year. A running friend arranged a meeting between Joe and his own girlfriend’s sister, Janet. The two talked briefly at a postrace party and began dating. In less than a year, they were married and Sarah, the first of three children, was born on Thanksgiving 1973. Joe, the high school and collegiate track man, was now a full-time road racer. The logical extension of switching to longer, slower training was running a marathon. His first, Boston in 1967, was his fastest, 2:49:48.

“Without knowing it, I stumbled onto the exactly correct ratio of fast and slow running. I later figured out that I raced best when my fast running totaled between 5 and 10 percent of my total mileage. Later I raced more and performance suffered. By the time I figured out what I’d done right, it was too late.”

## Shifting priorities

The 1968 Olympic Trials marathon in Alamosa, Colorado, was an inviting target: there was no qualifying time that year, but active duty with the Army Reserve kept Joe away. Once he settled in California, weekly racing was not uncommon, his longest race being 70 miles of a 100-mile race around Lake Tahoe. But the

► Joe before his first marathon, Boston 1967, with fellow Iowan Tom Murphy.

abundance of races was something of a curse, and Joe never matched the marathon time from Boston.

A 2:49 marathon on 50 to 60 miles a week suggests the possibility of running much faster. Entry into the 1972 Olympic Trials marathon required a time of 2:30. But Joe resisted the temptation to make a serious push for that time, reasoning that his legs were fragile enough that the increased effort would more likely produce a physical breakdown than a qualifying time. “I was never much of a risk taker, and even in 1972 my best time was a ways in the past.”



Courtesy of Joe Henderson

## The running boom generated a writing boom

The people pouring into the sport were generally affluent and educated. They not only ran but they read about running, and what most of them wanted to read were things that taught them how to run faster, suffer less, and stay healthy. Jim Fixx and George Sheehan hit the big time with their running books. Nothing that Joe wrote matched the sales of Fixx’s and Sheehan’s books. But they sold well. And there was money to be made by speaking at prerace clinics. Joe began to entertain the idea of supporting himself as a book author and clinic speaker.

Growth and prosperity at *Runner’s World* were not always tranquil. Its books and booklets sold reasonably well, but some authors thought they were not getting their share of the royalties. Jack Foster’s *Tale of the Ancient Marathoner* was published by *Runner’s World*. It’s considered a classic now, and used copies sell for as much as \$150. That’s about \$50 more than Jack made from the book, which left him feeling “ripped off,” though Foster told a friend that he never thought Joe was responsible.

A bigger issue involved running shoes. As the sport grew, more companies began selling running shoes, and those companies constantly expanded their product lines. *Runner's World* was perhaps the best and most logical place to advertise those shoes. In the mid-'70s, the magazine began rating each model of running shoe that was on the market. It was a simple rating method. There was a best shoe, a second-best, a third-best, and so on until there was a worst shoe. Not surprisingly, companies whose shoes were not listed at the top of the ratings were unhappy. Asked whether he wishes he could take back anything he has written, Joe answers unhesitatingly, "That's easy; anything about shoes."

Nike, in those years, was not the giant that it is now. It was a small but expanding company that depended heavily on sales of running shoes for its revenue. Nike shoes were not showing up at the top of the ratings lists very often, and its executives were unhappy. Allegations began to fly that companies whose shoes were highly rated also happened to be companies that spent the most money advertising in *Runner's World*. A lesser company than Nike might simply have advertised more, but that was not Nike's style in those years. It decided to start its own magazine.

## Yet another running magazine

That magazine would need editors who knew something about running magazines. Who knew more than Joe Henderson, who at the time was feeling the stress of the depleted royalty checks and aggravation about shoe-advertising controversies? In 1981, Joe left *Runner's World* and also left the San Francisco Bay area for Eugene, Oregon, to edit *Running*.

By the early '80s, there were two more Hendersons. Eric was born in 1977 and Leslie in 1982. Both required more attention than the average child. When Eric was 2 and not talking, "The pediatrician told us that boys were often late talkers and there was nothing to worry about." But a year later, he was still silent, and Joe and Janet were told that he needed hearing aids. Leslie's hearing problems were even more severe, and she was also diagnosed with Down syndrome.

*Running* was meant to be a different kind of running magazine. It published no race results or race schedules. There were brief pieces that gave advice. Joe, Jack Foster, and Jeff Galloway, among many others, turned out such features. Galloway's approach to marathon training—the single biweekly long run alternating with a long biweekly interval session with short recovery runs the rest of the time—debuted in *Running*. Don Kardong took his writing talent there. Famous nonrunning authors Ken Kesey and Hunter S. Thompson wrote for the magazine. *Running* was very well received critically. It was a major artistic success. But in three years it lost \$3 million, and Nike pulled the plug.

The booming market for running books had subsided. Joe could no longer envision supporting his family as a book author and clinic speaker. He was invited to return as a *Runner's World* regular columnist and West Coast editor, but he still needed the income that came from speaking at prerace clinics. Janet found it increasingly difficult to be left alone with three young children, and the marriage ended in 1983. The two older kids lived with Joe for the most part after the divorce, and he decided that “marriages come and go, but children are forever.” He became a full-time single father when not speaking at races, effectively ending his racing career, though he usually ran in the races where he spoke but more often than not without serious competitive aims. An exception came in 1983 on a trip to a 10K race in Thunder Bay, Ontario, when he won his first—“and only,” he points out—masters race.

When *Running* folded, Joe was settled into Eugene. “Janet and I wanted to keep the kids in the Eugene schools.” *Runner's World* allowed him to write his columns from Eugene. He became the custodial parent. Eventually, Joe began teaching journalism classes at the University of Oregon where he met Barbara Shaw, who would become his second wife.

Joe’s own pieces in *Running* were short. Most of his writing at that point was done in a private journal, something he has kept and written in daily since high school. Looking for more of an outlet for his ideas about the sport than *Running* was providing, Joe began publishing his own newsletter, *Running Commentary*, in 1982. Circulation was small, approximately 200 paid subscribers. Eventually, the cost of paper and postage forced the newsletter to an electronic-only existence. At first, *RC* was e-mailed to subscribers. Starting in 2002, the columns were simply posted to Joe’s Web site ([www.joehenderson.com](http://www.joehenderson.com)).

## Another change in careers

While at Drake, Joe had pondered a career as a teacher and coach, but a career in journalism

► Joe gives his first formal speech, in Culver City, California in 1970.



Courtesy of Joe Henderson

intervened. After the demise of *Running*, the University of Oregon gave Joe a second chance at a teaching career. The part-time journalism classes that he began teaching in 1986 became a full-time, one-year visiting professor's appointment in 1990-91. In 2001, he switched from teaching journalism to teaching classes in running. He now teaches four such classes a year with about 25 students per class. In 2005, he became a coach when the Eugene Running Company asked him to coach a beginner's marathon group it sponsors. He has been coaching that group ever since with classes that usually have around 40 members per session. The racing drought that began in the "single-dad years," the 1980s, brought a temporary end to Joe's marathoning days. As his kids grew, he began "running in races (again) rather than racing them." The marathon drought ended in 1989. He finished in 3:49, a personal worst, but seemed unbothered. Why did he decide to return to marathon running after so many years away? He was a fast track man, a miler. Why not return to miling or some shorter race?

"The marathon changed while I was away," is the reply. "Fields grew both bigger and slower. Track racing hadn't changed in that way. And my legs are too scarred to hold up under the sort of fast running I'd have to do. It would put the runs that really matter, the daily ones, at risk."

In earlier years, as Joe's interest in slow training grew, he cast around for others who advocated a similar approach. He was drawn to the ideas of Ernst van Aaken, a German medical doctor who had been a successful distance running coach since 1947. Van Aaken was more interested in using running as a way of promoting "health" for the masses. He was opposed to running in a way that places very high stress on the system. He wrote copiously and advised walking breaks as a way of allowing athletes to extend their training loads without inducing too much stress. Joe had read much of van Aaken's writing and was familiar with the idea of walking breaks without paying too much attention to it. An injured calf in 1975 changed that. The calf seemed better, and Joe joined his usual group on a Saturday for an easy two-hour run. After a few miles, pain shot through the calf. Joe decided that he wouldn't be able to do the run. He turned to walk back to the parking lot where the group had met. The calf improved and he tried to run. The calf was OK for a few minutes and then began to hurt. Joe walked until the pain went away and then ran again until the pain returned. He got back to the parking lot this way then, "I realized that I had to do something to fill in the time while I waited for my ride home."

He decided that he might as well continue with his run/walk mix and covered a bit more than 12 miles that way. Shortly afterward, Bill Rodgers won the Boston Marathon in the US record-setting time of 2:09:55. It was a stunning performance by a largely unknown runner. An interesting sidebar to the Rodgers story was that he had walked briefly four times during the race in order to take drinks and tie his shoe.

## Taking walking breaks

Joe, already thinking more seriously about mixing short walks with his running after his recent run/walk experience, was intrigued with Rodgers's breaks. Joe wrote an article about the experience for *Runner's World* suggesting that mixing brief walks with long runs would not slow the run dramatically and might actually speed it up by reducing fatigue.

"I finally understood what van Aaken was saying about walking breaks. Eventually, the injury healed and I no longer needed them. But," he would write, "I'm not sure I want to give them up."

Shortly after Joe's article appeared in *Runner's World*, Tom Osler, one of the better American ultramarathon runners at the time, published an article in the magazine explaining that he had managed to double the length of his longest runs by mixing regular walk breaks with his running.

At the time, Joe's articles on marathon preparation had been influenced by an idea drawn from Ken Young, another of the better US ultramarathoners of the time. Young had based his own training around an idea that came to be called the "collapse-point theory." Young's experience had taught him that a runner needed to cover a specific, minimal amount of mileage over the eight weeks preceding a race. Specifically, Young thought that a runner's daily average mileage over that span needed to be at least one third of the desired racing distance. That is, a newcomer to the sport wishing to finish a 10-kilometer race needed to average 2.1 miles a day in the eight weeks before the race. A marathoner needed to average nine miles per day, or 63 a week, and a 100-kilometer runner would need to average 21 miles per day for the eight weeks prior to the race. Young ran his best marathon, 2:25, off such training, doing no runs longer than 12.5 miles but doing four of them in a typical weekend and covering well over 100 miles a week. (Young emphasized that the one-third-of-your-race-distance average would allow a runner to finish the race but that more miles were needed for a runner planning to run the distance as fast as possible.)

At the time, Joe was advising a modified version of collapse-point training with a plan that worked weekly mileage up to 60 or so but with a long run that went as far as 18 miles. At about this time, Jeff Galloway was revising the training approach that had made him an Olympian at 10,000 meters in 1972 and an international-class marathoner. Jeff had always done both high mileage and a long run of 20 miles or so, but he had begun reducing his overall miles but lengthening his long run toward 30 miles or so. He had also been advising aspiring marathoners.

"Jeff was giving a talk at a clinic when some guy stood up and told Jeff that he (the guy) had been running marathons by doing one very long run each week and very little on the intervening days."

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Jeff began advising this approach as well. Some of the runners Jeff advised were not able to cover long distances without stopping, so Jeff incorporated the idea of extending those runs through regularly scheduled walking breaks. By the time Joe returned to marathoning in 1989, he found that the 60-plus-mile weeks he had previously advised were too much for his “veteran” runner’s legs but that he could manage an extended run once every week or two.

## Joe’s training theories evolve

Joe and Galloway had developed a close friendship and were advising similar populations. Joe now revised his own marathon-preparation program into one that was more along the lines of Galloway’s than of Ken Young’s collapse-point theory. But while Galloway had his runners work gradually up to runs of marathon length and beyond, Joe advised runners to work up to running for the length of time they expected their race to take. That is, someone hoping to run a two and one-half hour marathon would work up to a run of two and a half hours, while someone expecting to run a four-hour marathon would do a longest run of about four hours. This is the program Joe has presented to the runners he teaches in his marathon-preparation course. He admits that he can no longer train enough to run a full marathon and that the application of walking breaks allows him to do something along the lines of what Tom Osler describes: double the maximum distance he normally can run without really doing the training to allow it. In this way, Joe has extended his marathon career perhaps beyond its normal ending point. His times have slowed, and his recent races have produced a series of “PWs” (personal worsts).

At his best a sub-2:50 marathoner, Joe now runs slower than five hours. This seems not to faze him. Certainly he does



Courtesy of Napa Valley Marathon

► Joe celebrated his 50th running anniversary at the 2008 Napa Valley Marathon.

not stand out as a slower-than-average marathon runner. And today's average marathon runners are decidedly slower than their predecessors had been when Joe's writing career was in its early stages. From the days and weeks following the publication of *Long Slow Distance*, Joe has been criticized for "slowing" American distance running. Fred Wilt, a 1952 Olympian, coach, and author of many training books, once called the idea of long, slow distance training "a fraud."

Joe freely admits that he sort of "cheats" when he trains for and runs marathons. He mentions doing a four-hour run, then confesses, "It wasn't really a run. It was a run/walk." Run/walking has become a controversial topic in today's world of marathon running. Does it still count as a marathon if you haven't run the whole thing? Most of the runners Joe coaches now, he will tell you, don't think so. "They say it's a marathon run, not a marathon run/walk." But Joe says that for him, the matter of mixing walking with running is not a matter of choice. "If I didn't walk during marathons, I wouldn't be able to do them at all."

He has plenty of company. Perhaps the tens of thousands of runners who finish today's marathons are the end product of that mission statement that Joe and Bob Anderson cobbled together three and a half decades ago. So what does Joe think of the state of the sport today?

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## Joe's primary audience

"I always wrote for the middle-class runner," he says, defining that athlete as someone who is serious about running as well as possible but who isn't fast enough to earn a living from the sport and therefore needs to fit racing aspirations around work and family obligations.

What is the status of this middle-class runner in today's sport? Joe answers, "I don't think there are many more such athletes in the sport today than there were 30 years ago. Growth has come from more casual competitors coming to the sport, their numbers financing the professionalism of the modern sport."

It seems that many of these casual "competitors" don't really seem to be competing. Some finishers at today's road races are astonishingly slow. For example, the last-place finisher at a New England 5K road race clocked 3 hours, 37 minutes! Many, possibly most, of today's races are organized more as fund-raisers than as racing opportunities.

"I regret the loss of so many races at intermediate distances," Joe says, referring to races at 10 miles, 25 kilometers, 20 miles, and so on, distances that were once the staple of local road racing schedules but that have all but vanished in favor of 5Ks, half-marathons, and marathons. Those intermediate distances were wonderful marathon preparation, and the slowing of today's marathon might be lessened if prospective marathon runners had opportunities to race at these distances.

Joe expresses an aversion to massive fields in many modern races.

"My favorite races have about 100 runners per mile, such as 300 entrants for a five-kilometer race, 600 for a 10-kilometer race, and so on. Such sizes allow for real racing without excessive isolation."

Could those massive fields threaten the sport one day? What would happen if a race's entries dropped from, say, 7,000 to 5,000? Would the major sponsor decide that interest in the sport was declining so much that it was no longer worth the investment? Would the sport die? "Most races last for about seven years. Few go on for much longer. Then another race in the same general location comes along." OK, no worries there.

Professional running could not exist without these huge participation numbers. Is that good? Has professionalism changed the sport for better or worse? "I can't complain about runners making money from the sport, having done so myself for decades."

Professional running hasn't worked out in anything resembling the way it was expected to when the idea was germinating. There were two main rationales for professional running. One was that it made no sense that bowlers and tennis players could earn livings from their sports while runners needed to find another means of supporting themselves. The other was that US runners were forced to compete

with de facto professionals from Eastern Bloc countries. Allowing US runners to earn a living from the sport would free them of the need to spend eight or more daily hours at work, allowing them to use that time to train. Surely professional running would lead to a parade of US runners heading for the medal stands at subsequent Olympics and World Championships. What happened to that plan?

## The current state of the sport

“The idea itself was good, but it was implemented poorly. No one foresaw the flood of Africans that would follow the money. US runners began to avoid races. Race directors stopped inviting US runners and filled their fields with Africans.”

Does the sport need professional runners at all? “Professionals attract media attention. That attracts runners to the event.”

But most of the professionals now are Africans whose names are unrecognizable to most Americans. Joe can’t recall the names of most recent Boston Marathon winners. Is the African dominance bad for the sport?

“I don’t think the problem is that Africans per se are winning everything. I think it’s the numbers of them that creates difficulty. It’s not possible to remember who each of them are. They aren’t recognizable. The sport needs consistent names that people recognize.”

The situation, he thinks, is improving. He cites the Hansons-Brooks Distance Project, Team USA, Zap Fitness, McMillan Elite, and similar groups and says that for the first time in the professional era, US runners are not simply left to fend for themselves.

Does he see major changes for the sport in the future? “Not really. A lot of the younger, faster people who focus on track races now will likely come over to road races as they get older and slower. But,” he adds, “My own crystal ball is notoriously bad.”

What about his own future? “A few years ago, I made a conscious decision that I wouldn’t travel to races anymore. The few running trips I make are more like family reunions.” He cites Jeff Galloway’s and Dick Beardsley’s running camps and the Napa Valley Marathon organized by close friend and succeeding *Runner’s World* editor



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► Joe’s distant goal is to run a marathon in 2013, which would give him at least one marathon in each decade of his adult life, from his 20s to his 70s.

Rich Benyo. (What's that guy doing these days?) Joe mentions this, somewhat ironically, in an e-mail written very shortly after returning home from visiting his stepson in Hong Kong. He intends to continue teaching running classes and coaching his marathon group in Eugene.

For a time, it looked as though there might be no public venue for his writing. Editorial changes at *Runner's World* spelled an end to 30 years of column writing. He estimates that 95 percent of his readership vanished at that point. He was hired almost immediately by *Marathon & Beyond* first as the "On the Road" columnist and then as a permanent columnist. He also began writing his autobiography but has no plans to look for a publisher. The "book," *Starting Lines*, has been appearing in installments at his Web site. He notes that 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Long Slow Distance: The Humane Way to Train*. It does seem like a good time for some reminiscing.

## Explaining additional goals

Any other goals?

"Naturally, I'd like to keep running for as long as I possibly can. A distant goal is to run a marathon in June of 2013. That would give me a marathon in each decade of my adult life, from my 20s to my 70s." That marathon at 70 isn't a given. He mentions that at 66, he is the longest-lived male in his family.

Perhaps the most significant event in his recent life was being diagnosed with prostate cancer. Presumably, the disease was caught early. Treatment has ended recently and a checkup in May 2009 seemed to indicate that the treatment was successful. He has written and spoken extensively about the experience, hoping to motivate other men to have their prostates checked.

"We'll see if I've taken it too lightly . . . but I expect that something other than prostate cancer will get me. Eventually, something gets all of us."

Let's hope that whatever that something is, travels by Long Slow Distance.

