

My Life on the Run: The Wit, Wisdom, and Insights of a Road Racing Icon

We're spoiled in the wonderful world of running because most runners are swell people. (Because of the preponderance of swell-runner-type people, the real stinkers really stand out.)

One of the swellest of running people is Bart Yasso, the Chief Running Officer of *Runner's World* Magazine; Bart is known to many as the mayor of running. Bart works with thousands of races to get them free race numbers and running bags from *Runner's World*, in the process running all over the planet. Over the years, Bart has run in some pretty exciting, dangerous, exotic, and crazy races and places. He frequently gives his crazy-races slide presentation at prerace pasta feeds to the delight of the crowd; it is a nice way for the nervous runners to let off a little steam the night before their big race.

Bart is a terrific ambassador of our sport, especially because he is one of those inspiring people who didn't get anything handed to him. He overcame a lot of challenges to become the personable, beloved raconteur that he is today—and this is probably the first time in history that anyone raised in Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania, has ever been called a raconteur—spreading the message of running's revivifying effects to a panting world.

Those who know Bart can't believe this, but he has written a book—with the help of Kathleen Parrish, who probably had to beat Bartie over the head with a computer mouse on a regular basis to get him to sit down and cooperate. It's not that Bart has a short attention span; it's more that he is nuclear infused and can't sit still for very long.

The book is titled *My Life on the Run: The Wit, Wisdom, and Insights of a Road Racing Icon* and is published by Rodale, which publishes *Runner's World*.

The strength of the book for those who know Bart casually is that he fills in his personal back story, the part of Bart that isn't on public display when he gives his entertaining talks. Born the middle child of seven in a family led by a pigheaded Slovak father, Bart received little love and support from the old man. A spindly-legged kid built like a soda straw, Bart contrasted almost comically with his brothers, who were making names for themselves in football and baseball and garnering the old man's attention and affection. Bart probably would have been happy for a childhood based on benign neglect. Although his father pretty

much ignored him, when he did notice Bart, it was always with a negative eye. (“I was never asked to join my brothers when my father took them golfing or to Philadelphia for baseball games. The man barely said two words to me, nor would he refer to me by my real name. He called me Alice.”)

In high school, Bart drifted downward like detritus spiraling toward the bottom of a deep ocean. He drank cheap beer and wine, smoked cigarettes, and indulged in the popular weed of the day. Things were looking good for an early extinction for young Bart. Then a series of events occurred that changed his life. He got arrested when a guy he was with tried to buy weed from an undercover cop. He swore off weed and drank more, but another series of events—I won’t ruin the story of the fortuitous chain of events that fell into place—led him to take up running. Just a little running, early in the morning, before he left for his dead-end job.

He discovered that he had at least a modest talent for running. He increased his volume and intensity and eventually ended up working at *Runner’s World*, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Bart’s book nicely blends his varied adventure runs (elements of his standard talk include India, Death Valley, and the Antarctic) with the trials and tribulations of his personal life (which he doesn’t weave into his talk). The result is a nice autobiography that modestly lays out why Bart is Bart in an honest, lighthearted, upbeat way.

The book is also nice from the obvious standpoint that we all have heard Bart’s fantastic running tales, but in book form, he can elaborate on them, enrich the terrain, and fill in a lot of the nuances that don’t make it into the talks. We will credit Kathleen Parrish with lassoing Bart’s wild-man stories and corralling them, which brings me to complimenting both of them on some memorable lines. This one comes from the chapter in which Bart heads west to take part in a race where you have to run with a burro: “What’s the difference [between mules and burros]? Mules are the domesticated offspring of a female horse and a donkey, and a burro is a small donkey. A jackass is a wild donkey or someone who runs a race with a burro.”

Or consider these lines from the chapter on the Bare Buns Fun Run 5K, held at a nudist camp: “The display of flesh was like passing a car wreck on the highway. You didn’t want to look, but you had to look. You couldn’t help it. My eyes were drawn to boobs, butts, and, um, other things. But after a few minutes, I had seen my fill. I couldn’t handle any more nudity. It was like eating too much chocolate chip cookie dough. I felt a little queasy.”

Bart’s story is inspiring, charming, full of fun and humor (some of it, classically, culled from pain), and as easy to take as it is to take a run with Bart.

My only quibble: the training programs pasted into the latter part of such a smoothly paced autobiography come across like leather elbow patches on a nudist. —*Rich Benyo*