

When Running was Young And So Were We

BY JACK D. WELCH

It is unfortunate, but most newbie runners aren't going to read this book. In part because, as some of the gnarly old observers of the scene will tell you, new runners assume that running on a huge scale began when they started running. They have no sense of world or American history, so why would they have a sense and an appreciation of the giants of running on whose shoulders they stand?

Welch is of that era known as the First Running Boom. You know: Way back in time from the '70s to the mid-'80s when otherwise sane adults began running around the streets and roads in their underwear and their sneakers; when "pro" runners made little if any money and when amateur runners of varied talent trained sometimes harder than the "pro" runners so that they could work their way a little closer to the front of the starting line where the studs lived and played. Back when guys and a handful of gals with full-time jobs (and sometimes more-than-full-time jobs) were running 100 miles a week and when you weren't considered a serious amateur if you hadn't dropped below the three-hour mark in the marathon. Where there were so damned many runners doing just that that in order to maintain sanity, the Boston Marathon lowered the qualifying times for the open men's division to 2:50. Back when Gatorade tasted like lightly-flavored sweat, when there was no such thing as sports gels or sports beans, and when you had to come up with your own sports drink container, which often turned out to be a recycled plastic bear-shaped honey bottle.

But it cannot be referred to as a "prehistoric" era because it was thoroughly recorded by the nursery of running books and publications, many of which still exist today. It was the era when *Runner's World Magazine* had more pages than it does today, when *Running Times* and *The Runner* were launched, where books by Jim Fixx, Doc Sheehan, Joe Henderson, Hal Higdon, and Bob Glover made the bookshelves in the running section of bookstores groan under their weight. It was the era when some of the running club magazines rivaled the professional running magazines in size and quality; Jack Leydig's *Northern California Running Review*, A West Valley Track Club Publication, was a full-sized magazine

that carried four-color full-page adidas and Nike ads, and where 48-page issues were the norm. It is also the era when Jack Welch founded *Running Magazine*, an eccentric publication heavy on creativity and grounded in a knowledge of and intimacy with the runners of what many of us now think of as The Golden Age of Distance Running.

Eventually *Running* became a possession of Nike and after some startling issues, it died off, in part because Nike forgot to remember that other running shoe companies were not going to advertise in a magazine owned by a competitor.

During the era that *Running* flourished and eventually floundered, Jack Welch produced a meaty amount of fine writing about the sport both in his magazine and once it was gone, in other publications. He wrote with a flare that brought the sport and the subject alive and he wrote with passion so that his pieces were not always journalism, but sometimes strayed into an understandable adoration for his subject(s).

The pieces in this book run from 1978 to 1995 and many of them are dedicated to runners who were factors in those years, but who today's runner has never heard of: Jon Sinclair, Mark Nenow, Mark Curp, John Gregorek, Ed Eyestone, Steve Spence, Chris Fox, Bob Kennedy, Keith Brantly, Lynn Jennings, etc. Of course he also includes his profiles and updates on Dick Beardsley, Al Salazar, Mary Decker, Joanie Benoit, etc. And he closes out the book with his fine, titillating "Pre lives! S'pose Pre Had Lived? What If?", a haunting, parallel world piece that makes the reader think, but that also opens the door to various other fates for Pre, not all of them necessarily exceptional.

The book is a literary feast for those of us who ran during those years, but then we remember the touchstones he lays out, so we appreciate the characters. For the student of running—Are there many of those?—this tome captures the energy and the dedication and the near-craziness of The First Running Boom. If it has one shortcoming, that would be that Jack would have served those of us with failing memories by citing the first publication information for each of the pieces included. Because at our age, we need things spelled out for us.