

Born to Run

BY CHRISTOPHER McDUGALL

Simply put, this is one of the best running books written in years. Many years. What makes it so riveting is a combination of narrative writing style and McDougall's choice of a subject that is enticing, compelling, and dramatic.

Stripped down, the book is about a race nobody saw between the legendary long-distance runners, the Tarahumara Indians of the Copper Canyon in Mexico, and a handful of colorful ultrarunners from the outside world.

McDougall, a former Associated Press war correspondent, knows his way around remote, dangerous places almost as well as he knows his way around the keyboard he uses to build his narratives.

Few running books are written as a narrative, unless it is one of the flood of first-person narratives being self-published these days to celebrate some noteworthy running accomplishment in that runner's personal life. Most running books are either how-to, biographies/autobiographies, or essays on the joys and tribulations of running long.

McDougall's is rich textured in that his narrative contains a bouquet of those types woven into the ongoing story.

There has been a lot of press (generated both by journalists looking for controversy and by the author himself to, hopefully, sell books) about barefoot running, and its pros and cons, that has, unfortunately, somewhat muddied the waters as to just what this book is really about. The discussion of barefoot or "minimalist" running is contained in a single chapter (chapter 25). And of course it's a fascinating subject: Do we actually undermine our healthy running by wearing over-engineered (and expensive) running shoes? Were human beings not built to chase down game while running barefoot through the savannah? Shouldn't we all be attempting, in this increasingly complex and often dysfunctional world, to return to The Garden? Well, yes...and no.

Do we really want to live in a world where a microscopic bacteria taken in-board while being scratched on the sole of the bare foot can kill you in a matter of days? Not likely.

But are a lot of things we use these days over-engineered? You betcha.

The argument in regards shodding the long-distance runner isn't so much about running barefoot as it is about running in less. McDougall now runs in the gorilla-paw-looking Vibram Five Fingers "shoe," and seems to be doing very well, solving some of his nagging running injuries by running on less.

The Tarahumara Indians, however, don't typically run barefoot. More often, they fashion sandals out of old tire treads.

But again, whether they run barefoot or wearing Michelin double-belted radials, isn't the prime ingredient here. That is merely the salt and pepper.

The main course is a suspense-filled narrative of McDougall attempting to venture into the dangerous (marauding drug gangs that are heavily-armed and high on craziness) part of the world (something he's not unused to) to meet and perhaps run with the fabled Tarahumara, and the encounter with Caballo Blanco (The White Horse), which leads him down a completely different trail when he learns that Blanco, an eccentric American who came years ago to learn the running ways of the Tarahumara, dreams of putting on a race in the Tarahumara home court that would pit them against a sampling of hot-dog American ultrafolks, including but not limited to ultra-legend Scott Jurek.

The chapters on topics like barefoot (or near-barefoot) running are sprinkled throughout the narrative in order to give the reader more solid information but also to tease the reader by withholding the ultimate race until the very end, by which point the reader is ready to book a flight to Mexico, get aboard the train that descends into the Copper Canyon, and squat outside a Tarahumara hut drinking awful corn beer with them until the green flag is dropped on the next race.

McDougall's skill as a writer is evident on every page as the writing never intrudes on the story; the book is so finely written that the reader is sucked along without the power to brake or slow down the momentum. McDougall is in that rarefied running-writer air of Kenny Moore and Don Kardong.

And what makes the book even more enticing, is that it is the book that you could buy for a non-runner to explain to him or her, in near-poetry, what the allure of very long-distance running is. Of course, at the same time, the book and McDougall's masterful recreation of the squad of colorful and wacko characters will confirm for your non-running friend that all distance runners are lunatics. But what a happy asylum it is.