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Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen

By Christopher McDougall



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Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen By Christopher McDougall

The astonishing national bestseller and hugely entertaining story that completely changed the way we run.

An epic adventure that began with one simple question: Why does my foot hurt?

Isolated by Mexico's deadly Copper Canyons, the blissful Tarahumara Indians have honed the ability to run hundreds of miles without rest or injury. In a riveting narrative, award-winning journalist and often-injured runner Christopher McDougall sets out to discover their secrets. In the process, he takes his readers from science labs at Harvard to the sun-baked valleys and freezing peaks across North America, where ever-growing numbers of ultra-runners are pushing their bodies to the limit, and, finally, to a climactic race in the Copper Canyons that pits America's best ultra-runners against the tribe. McDougall's incredible story will not only engage your mind but inspire your body when you realize that you, indeed all of us, were born to run.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Book Description

Full of incredible characters, amazing athletic achievements, cutting-edge science, and, most of all, pure inspiration, *Born to Run* is an epic adventure that began with one simple question: *Why does my foot hurt?* In search of an answer, Christopher McDougall sets off to find a tribe of the world's greatest distance runners and learn their secrets, and in the process shows us that everything we thought we knew about running is wrong.

Isolated by the most savage terrain in North America, the reclusive Tarahumara Indians of Mexico's deadly Copper Canyons are custodians of a lost art. For centuries they have practiced techniques that allow them to run hundreds of miles without rest and chase down anything from a deer to an Olympic marathoner while enjoying every mile of it. Their superhuman talent is matched by uncanny health and serenity, leaving the Tarahumara immune to the diseases and strife that plague modern existence. With the help of Caballo Blanco, a mysterious loner who lives among the tribe, the author was able not only to uncover the secrets of the Tarahumara but also to find his own inner ultra-athlete, as he trained for the challenge of a lifetime: a fifty-mile race through the heart of Tarahumara country pitting the tribe against an odd band of Americans, including a star ultramarathoner, a beautiful young surfer, and a barefoot wonder.

With a sharp wit and wild exuberance, McDougall takes us from the high-tech science labs at Harvard to the sun-baked valleys and freezing peaks across North America, where ever-growing numbers of ultrarunners are pushing their bodies to the limit, and, finally, to the climactic race in the Copper Canyons. *Born to Run* is that rare book that will not only engage your mind but inspire your body when you realize that the secret to happiness is right at your feet, and that you, indeed all of us, were born to run.

Amazon Exclusive: A Q&A with Christopher McDougall

Question: *Born to Run* explores the life and running habits of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico's Copper Canyon, arguably the greatest distance runners in the world. What are some of the secrets you learned from them?



Christopher McDougall: The key secret hit me like a thunderbolt. It was so simple, yet such a jolt. It was this: everything I'd been taught about running was wrong. We treat running in the modern world the same way we treat childbirth—it's going to hurt, and requires special exercises and equipment, and the best you can hope for is to get it over with quickly with minimal damage.

Then I meet the Tarahumara, and they're having a blast. They remember what it's like to love running, and it lets them blaze through the canyons like dolphins rocketing through waves. For them, running isn't work. It

isn't a punishment for eating. It's fine art, like it was for our ancestors. Way before we were scratching pictures on caves or beating rhythms on hollow trees, we were perfecting the art of combining our breath and mind and muscles into fluid self-propulsion over wild terrain. And when our ancestors finally did make their first cave paintings, what were the first designs? A downward slash, lightning bolts through the bottom and middle—behold, the Running Man.

The Tarahumara have a saying: “Children run before they can walk.” Watch any four-year-old—they do everything at full speed, and it's all about fun. That's the most important thing I picked up from my time in the Copper Canyons, the understanding that running can be fast and fun and spontaneous, and when it is, you feel like you can go forever. But all of that begins with your feet. Strange as it sounds, the Tarahumara taught me to change my relationship with the ground. Instead of hammering down on my heels, the way I'd been taught all my life, I learned to run lightly and gently on the balls of my feet. The day I mastered it was the last day I was ever injured.

Q: You trained for your first ultramarathon—a race organized by the mysterious gringo expat Caballo Blanco between the Tarahumara and some of America's top ultrarunners—while researching and writing this book. What was your training like?

CM: It really started as kind of a dare. Just by chance, I'd met an adventure-sports coach from Jackson Hole, Wyoming named Eric Orton. Eric's specialty is tearing endurance sports down to their basic components and looking for transferable skills. He studies rock climbing to find shoulder techniques for kayakers, and applies Nordic skiing's smooth propulsion to mountain biking. What he's looking for are basic engineering principles, because he's convinced that the next big leap forward in fitness won't come from strength or technology, but plain, simple durability. With some 70% of all runners getting hurt every year, the athlete who can stay healthy and avoid injury will leave the competition behind.

So naturally, Eric idolized the Tarahumara. Any tribe that has 90-year-old men running across mountaintops obviously has a few training tips up its sleeve. But since Eric had never actually met the Tarahumara, he had to deduce their methods by pure reasoning. His starting point was uncertainty; he assumed that the Tarahumara step into the unknown every time they leave their caves, because they never know how fast they'll have to sprint after a rabbit or how tricky the climbing will be if they're caught in a storm. They never even know how long a race will be until they step up to the starting line—the distance is only determined in a last-minute bout of negotiating and could stretch anywhere from 50 miles to 200-plus.

Eric figured shock and awe was the best way for me to build durability and mimic Tarahumara-style running. He'd throw something new at me every day—hopping drills, lunges, mile intervals—and lots and lots of hills. There was no such thing, really, as long, slow distance—he'd have me mix lots of hill repeats and short bursts of speed into every mega-long run.

I didn't think I could do it without breaking down, and I told Eric that from the start. I basically defied him to turn me into a runner. And by the end of nine months, I was cranking out four hour runs without a problem.

Q: You're a six-foot four-inches tall, 200-plus pound guy—not anyone's typical vision of a distance runner, yet you've completed ultra marathons and are training for more. Is there a body type for running, as many of us assume, or are all humans built to run?

CM: Yeah, I'm a big'un. But isn't it sad that's even a reasonable question? I bought into that bull for a loooong time. Why wouldn't I? I was constantly being told by people who should know better that “some bodies aren't designed for running.” One of the best sports medicine physicians in the country told me exactly that—that the reason I was constantly getting hurt is because I was too big to handle the impact shock from my feet hitting the ground. Just recently, I interviewed a nationally-known sports podiatrist who

said, “You know, we didn’t ALL evolve to run away from saber-toothed tigers.” Meaning, what? That anyone who isn’t sleek as a Kenyan marathoner should be extinct? It’s such illogical blather—all kinds of body types exist today, so obviously they DID evolve to move quickly on their feet. It’s really awful that so many doctors are reinforcing this learned helplessness, this idea that you have to be some kind of elite being to handle such a basic, universal movement.

Q: If humans are born to run, as you argue, what’s your advice for a runner who is looking to make the leap from shorter road races to marathons, or marathons to ultramarathons? Is running really for everyone?

CM: I think ultrarunning is America’s hope for the future. Honestly. The ultrarunners have got a hold of some powerful wisdom. You can see it at the starting line of any ultra race. I showed up at the Leadville Trail 100 expecting to see a bunch of hollow-eyed Skeletors, and instead it was, “Whoah! Get a load of the hotties!” Ultra runners tend to be amazingly healthy, youthful and—believe it or not—good looking. I couldn’t figure out why, until one runner explained that throughout history, the four basic ingredients for optimal health have been clean air, good food, fresh water and low stress. And that, to a T, describes the daily life of an ultrarunner. They’re out in the woods for hours at a time, breathing pine-scented breezes, eating small bursts of digestible food, downing water by the gallons, and feeling their stress melt away with the miles. But here’s the real key to that kingdom: you have to relax and enjoy the run. No one cares how fast you run 50 miles, so ultrarunners don’t really stress about times. They’re out to enjoy the run and finish strong, not shave a few inconsequential seconds off a personal best. And that’s the best way to transition up to big mileage races: as coach Eric told me, “If it feels like work, you’re working too hard.”

Q: You write that distance running is the great equalizer of age and gender. Can you explain?

CM: Okay, I’ll answer that question with a question: Starting at age nineteen, runners get faster every year until they hit their peak at twenty-seven. After twenty-seven, they start to decline. So if it takes you eight years to reach your peak, how many years does it take for you to regress back to the same speed you were running at nineteen?

Go ahead, guess all you want. No one I’ve asked has ever come close. It’s in the book, so I won’t give it away, but I guarantee when you hear the answer, you’ll say, “No way. THAT old?” Now, factor in this: ultra races are the only sport in the world in which women can go toe-to-toe with men and hand them their heads. Ann Trason and Krissy Moehl often beat every man in the field in some ultraraces, while Emily Baer recently finished in the Top 10 at the Hardrock 100 while stopping to breastfeed her baby at the water stations.

So how’s that possible? According to a new body of research, it’s because humans are the greatest distance runners on earth. We may not be fast, but we’re born with such remarkable natural endurance that humans are fully capable of outrunning horses, cheetahs and antelopes. That’s because we once hunted in packs and on foot; all of us, men and women alike, young and old together.

Q: One of the fascinating parts of *Born to Run* is your report on how the ultrarunners eat—salad for breakfast, wraps with hummus mid-run, or pizza and beer the night before a run. As a runner with a lot of miles behind him, what are your thoughts on nutrition for running?

CM: Live every day like you’re on the lam. If you’ve got to be ready to pick up and haul butt at a moment’s notice, you’re not going to be loading up on gut-busting meals. I thought I’d have to go on some kind of prison-camp diet to get ready for an ultra, but the best advice I got came from coach Eric, who told me to just worry about the running and the eating would take care of itself. And he was right, sort of. I instinctively began eating smaller, more digestible meals as my miles increased, but then I went behind his back and consulted with the great Dr. Ruth Heidrich, an Ironman triathlete who lives on a vegan diet. She’s the one

who gave me the idea of having salad for breakfast, and it's a fantastic tip. The truth is, many of the greatest endurance athletes of all time lived on fruits and vegetables. You can get away with garbage for a while, but you pay for it in the long haul. In the book, I describe how Jenn Shelton and Billy "Bonehead" Barnett like to chow pizza and Mountain Dew in the middle of 100-mile races, but Jenn is also a vegetarian who most days lives on veggie burgers and grapes.

Q: In this difficult financial time, we're experiencing yet another surge in the popularity of running. Can you explain this?

CM: When things look worst, we run the most. Three times, America has seen distance-running skyrocket and it's always in the midst of a national crisis. The first boom came during the Great Depression; the next was in the '70s, when we were struggling to recover from a recession, race riots, assassinations, a criminal President and an awful war. And the third boom? One year after the Sept. 11 attacks, trailrunning suddenly became the fastest-growing outdoor sport in the country. I think there's a trigger in the human psyche that activates our first and greatest survival skill whenever we see the shadow of approaching raptors.

(Photo © James Rexroad)

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From the depths of Mexico's Copper Canyon to the heights of the Leadville Trail 100 ultramarathon in Colorado, from the centuries-old running techniques of Mexico's Tarahumara tribe to a research lab at the University of Utah, author McDougall celebrates, in this engaging and picaresque account, humankind's innate love of running. There are rogues aplenty here, such the deadly narco-traffickers who roam Copper Canyon, but there are many more who inspire, such as the Tarahumara runners, who show the rest of the world the false limitations we place on human endurance. McDougall has served as an Associated Press war correspondent, is a contributing editor to *Men's Health*, and runs at his home in rural Pennsylvania, and he brings all of these experiences to bear in this slyly important, highly readable account. --Alan Moores

Review

"A tale so mind-blowing as to be the stuff of legend." —*The Denver Post*

"McDougall's book reminded me of why I love to run." —Bill Rodgers, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Fascinating. . . . Thrilling. . . . An operatic ode to the joys of running." —*The Washington Post*

"It's a great book. . . . A really gripping read. . . . Unbelievable story . . . a really phenomenal book." —Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*

"One of the most entertaining running books ever." —Amby Burfoot, *Runnersworld.com*

"Equal parts quest, physiology treatise, and running history. . . . [McDougall] seeks to learn the secrets of the Tarahumara the old-fashioned way: He tracks them down. . . . The climactic race reads like a sprint. . . . It simply makes you want to run." —*Outside Magazine*

"McDougall recounts his quest to understand near superhuman ultra-runners with adrenaline pumped writing, humor and a distinct voice...he never lets go from his impassioned mantra that humans were born to run." —NPR

“*Born to Run* is a fascinating and inspiring true adventure story, based on humans pushing themselves to the limits. It’s destined to become a classic.”—Sir Ranulph Fiennes, author of *Mad, Bad and Dangerous To Know*

“Equal parts hilarity, explanation and earnestness—whisks the reader along on a compelling dash to the end, and along the way captures the sheer joy that a brisk run brings.” —*Science News*

“*Born to Run* is funny, insightful, captivating, and a great and beautiful discovery.” —Lynne Cox, author of *Swimming to Antarctica*

“A page-turner, taking the reader on an epic journey in search of the world’s greatest distance runners in an effort to uncover the secrets of their endurance.” —*The Durango Herald*

“Driven by an intense yet subtle curiosity, Christopher McDougall gamely treads across the continent to pierce the soul and science of long-distance running.”—Hampton Sides, author of *Blood and Thunder* and *Ghost Soldiers*

Users Review

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Brian Dunlap:

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many kinds or type. Start from kids until teens. For example Naruto or Private investigator Conan you can read and believe that you are the character on there. Therefore , not at all of book tend to be make you bored, any it offers you feel happy, fun and unwind. Try to choose the best book for you personally and try to like reading which.

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