



Fast friends: a group of African runners lead the way at the 2013 Barcelona Marathon

BETTER TOGETHER

In his book, *How Bad Do You Want It?*, endurance sports writer **Matt Fitzgerald** explores the psychology of mind over muscle. Here he explains why running with others can help you to push beyond your perceived limits

It has been proposed that Kenyans – particularly the Kalenjin tribe of the Rift Valley – have a “genetic advantage” as runners. It’s a somewhat troubling notion whose origins are not entirely rational. After all, nobody has proposed that the Finnish dominance of running between 1912 and 1928 was the result of genetic superiority. Psychologist Adam Waytz of Northwestern University has explored this type of inconsistency, which he calls *superhumanisation bias*. His studies have revealed that white people are far more likely to attribute superhuman qualities to blacks than they are to fellow whites who perform at a high level. So, when looking at white dominance of a particular sport, white people tend to look for a social or environmental explanation, such as a strong work ethic, but when looking at black dominance of a sport, they are more likely to look for an explanation in breeding.

If a genetic advantage does exist, what might it consist of? One possibility is that some or all Kenyans possess a gene or group of genes favourable to running performance that are nonexistent in other peoples. For example, Kalenjins alone on earth might have a gene that strengthens a specific adaptive response to aerobic exercise. Biologists say that is extremely unlikely, however, as there are vanishingly

few gene variants that exist exclusively within a single human population.

RUNNING CULTURE

The alternative to the genetic explanation of Kenyan dominance in running is the cultural and environmental explanation. Supporting evidence for this account is plentiful, and it begins with the fact that the phenomenon of national dominance of a sport is hardly peculiar to running. Indeed, there are rather few examples of sports that are *not* dominated to some degree by a single nation or by a small group of nations.

The tiny island of Cuba has captured 67 Olympics medals in the sport of boxing since 1968, more than any other country. Germany has finished either first, second or third in 13 of the last 16 World Cups.

Nations that dominate a particular sport share one basic characteristic: their people are *crazy* for that sport. To put it in a formula: national dominance of a sport is a function of the scope and intensity of its citizens’ participation in it. If enormous numbers of a nation’s people participate in a sport, that nation is certain to do quite well in global competition.

Sociologist John Bruhn dubbed this phenomenon the *group effect*. The psychobiological model of endurance performance explains how it works in the »

“ENDURANCE ATHLETES PERCEIVE LESS EFFORT AND PERFORM BETTER WHEN TRAINING AND RACING COOPERATIVELY THAN THEY DO ALONE”

context of sports like running. According to this model, any factor that reduces the amount of effort an athlete perceives at a given level of exercise intensity will enhance performance. When people work together, their brains release greater amounts of mood-lifting, discomfort-suppressing endorphins than they do when the same task is undertaken alone.

Consequently, endurance athletes perceive less effort and perform better when training and racing cooperatively than they do alone. The group effect is not something that has to be acquired. It is a coping skill that exists latently in everyone, ready to be activated by the right situation.

What is the right situation? There are two – call them micro and macro – that are relevant to running. One situation (micro) is any type of group workout or team competition in which a number of individuals work together. The other situation (macro) is a broader sport culture in which numerous groups of athletes train and race together often.

BOSTON OR BUST

Kenya and Finland are not the only places where the group effect has supported a running dynasty. In 1979, four of the five top finishers at the US cross-country champs were members of one team: the Greater Boston Track Club (BGTC).

As home of the world's oldest marathon, Boston was ground zero of the running boom that swept across America in the 1970s. After hometown favourite Bill Rodgers won the Boston Marathon in 1975, the BGTC attracted young runners dreaming of greatness from all over the US. Like Kenya's runners today, these men and women were willing to risk everything

in pursuit of their dream. The results were extraordinary. In 1984, 84 runners, mostly Americans, finished in less than 2 hours 20 minutes at the Boston Marathon.

That feat has never been duplicated. Money, of all things, spoiled the group effect within the GBTC and in American running as a whole. Before 1981, runners were forbidden to accept prize money or sign endorsements. Then Bill Rodgers and a brave handful of peers rebelled against their exploitation. The major running shoe brands began to pay the best runners to wear their gear but passed over sub-elite talents. As a result, young runners with second-tier talent stopped moving to Boston to train with the greats.

The performance level of American running suffered. It wasn't because the best American runners had become less genetically gifted. It was because the most genetically gifted runners weren't being pushed by vast numbers of runners with equal and slightly less talent who were training like professionals. The nadir came at the 2000 Olympics in Athens, where no American runners finished better than sixth in a race longer than 400 metres.

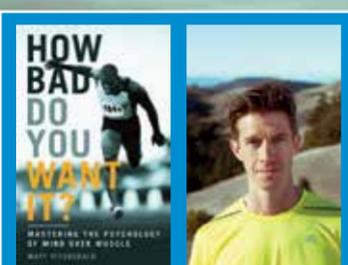
After the disaster of the 2000 Olympics, leaders in the US running community decided enough was enough. Postulating that the loss of the group effect was the cause of the decline of US running, they sought to correct the problem by creating the post-collegiate running clubs for athletes of elite-level talent. Their hope was that the runners who participated in these clubs would benefit from the group effect at the micro-level and achieve great performances that would in turn revitalise the broader running community.

It worked. At the 2013 World Outdoor Track and Field Championships, America won four medals to Kenya's three in the men's and women's 800 and 1500 metres.

Perhaps the most remarkable result, however, came at the 2013 World Cross Country Championships, where the US team finished in silver medal position, behind Ethiopia but ahead of the lauded Kenyan team. Back home, American running fans hailed Team USA's historic defeat of mighty Kenya as the “miracle in the dirt”. But it wasn't a miracle. It was the group effect, a force that all athletes can exploit to attain far greater heights together than they ever could alone. 



Inset: Kenyan and Ethiopian runners bunched at the 2012 London Marathon Main: Kenya's Laban Kipkemoi Moiben leads the way during the 2015 Siberian International Marathon



This is an edited extract from Matt Fitzgerald's book, *How Bad Do You Want It?* (Aurum Press), which is out now, priced £14.99.