

BORN TO RUN

A HIDDEN TRIBE, SUPERATHLETES,

AND THE GREATEST RACE

THE WORLD HAS NEVER SEEN

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CHAPTER 2



IT ALL BEGAN with a simple question that no one could answer.

It was a five-word puzzle that led me to a photo of a very fast man in a very short skirt, and from there it only got stranger. Soon, I was dealing with a murder, drug guerrillas, and a one-armed man with a cream-cheese cup strapped to his head. I met a beautiful blonde forest ranger who slipped out of her clothes and found salvation by running naked in the Idaho forests, and a young surfer babe in pigtailed who ran straight toward her death in the desert. A talented young runner would die. Two others would barely escape with their lives.

I kept looking, and stumbled across the Barefoot Batman . . . Naked Guy . . . Kalahari Bushmen . . . the Toenail Amputee . . . a cult devoted to distance running and sex parties . . . the Wild Man of the Blue Ridge Mountains . . . and, ultimately, the ancient tribe of the Tarahumara and their shadowy disciple, Caballo Blanco.

In the end, I got my answer, but only after I found myself in the middle of the greatest race the world would never see: the Ultimate Fighting Competition of footraces, an underground showdown pitting some of the best ultradistance runners of our time against the best ultrarunners of *all* time, in a fifty-mile race on hidden trails only Tarahumara feet had ever touched. I'd be startled to discover that the ancient saying of the *Tao Te Ching*—"The best runner leaves no tracks"—wasn't some gossamer koan, but real, concrete, how-to, training advice.

And all because in January 2001 I asked my doctor this:
 “How come my foot hurts?”

I’d gone to see one of the top sports-medicine specialists in the country because an invisible ice pick was driving straight up through the sole of my foot. The week before, I’d been out for an easy three-mile jog on a snowy farm road when I suddenly whinnied in pain, grabbing my right foot and screaming curses as I toppled over in the snow. When I got a grip on myself, I checked to see how badly I was bleeding. I must have impaled my foot on a sharp rock, I figured, or an old nail wedged in the ice. But there wasn’t a drop of blood, or even a hole in my shoe.

“Running is your problem,” Dr. Joe Torg confirmed when I limped into his Philadelphia examining room a few days later. He should know; Dr. Torg had not only helped create the entire field of sports medicine, but he also co-wrote *The Running Athlete*, the definitive radiographic analysis of every conceivable running injury. He ran me through an X-ray and watched me hobble around, then determined that I’d aggravated my cuboid, a cluster of bones parallel to the arch that I hadn’t even known existed until it reengineered itself into an internal Taser.

“But I’m barely running at all,” I said. “I’m doing, like, two or three miles every other day. And not even on asphalt. Mostly dirt roads.”

Didn’t matter. “The human body is not designed for that kind of abuse,” Dr. Torg replied. “Especially not *your* body.”

I knew exactly what he meant. At six feet four inches and two hundred thirty pounds, I’d been told many times that nature intended guys my size to post up under the hoop or take a bullet for the President, not pound our bulk down the pavement. And since I’d turned forty, I was starting to see why; in the five years since I’d stopped playing pickup hoops and tried turning myself into a marathoner, I’d ripped my hamstring (twice), strained my Achilles tendons (repeatedly), sprained my ankles (both, alternately), suffered aching arches (regularly), and had to walk down stairs backward on tiptoe because my heels were so sore. And now, apparently, the last docile spot on my feet had joined the rebellion.

The weird thing was, I seemed to be otherwise unbreakable. As a

writer for *Men’s Health* magazine and one of *Esquire* magazine’s original “Restless Man” columnists, a big part of my job was experimenting with semi-extreme sports. I’d ridden Class IV rapids on a boogie board, surfed giant sand dunes on a snowboard, and mountain biked across the North Dakota Badlands. I’d also reported from three war zones for the Associated Press and spent months in some of the most lawless regions of Africa, all without a nick or a twinge. But jog a few miles down the street, and suddenly I’m rolling on the ground like I’d been gut shot in a drive-by.

Take any other sport, and an injury rate like mine would classify me as defective. In running, it makes me normal. The real mutants are the runners who *don’t* get injured. Up to eight out of every ten runners are hurt *every year*. It doesn’t matter if you’re heavy or thin, speedy or slow, a marathon champ or a weekend huffer, you’re just as likely as the other guy to savage your knees, shins, hamstrings, hips, or heels. Next time you line up for a Turkey Trot, look at the runners on your right and left: statistically, only one of you will be back for the Jingle Bell Jog.

No invention yet has slowed the carnage; you can now buy running shoes with steel bedsprings embedded in the soles and Adidas that adjust their cushioning by microchip, but the injury rate hasn’t decreased a jot in thirty years. If anything, it’s actually ebbed up; Achilles tendon blowouts have seen a 10 percent increase. Running seemed to be the fitness version of drunk driving: you could get away with it for a while, you might even have some fun, but catastrophe was waiting right around the corner.

“Big surprise,” the sports-medicine literature sneers. Not exactly like that, though. More like this: “Athletes whose sport involves running put enormous strain on their legs.” That’s what the *Sports Injury Bulletin* has declared. “Each footfall hits one of their legs with a force equal to more than twice their body weight. Just as repeated hammering on an apparently impenetrable rock will eventually reduce the stone to dust, the impact loads associated with running can ultimately break down your bones, cartilage, muscles, tendons, and ligaments.” A report by the American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons concluded that distance running is “an outrageous threat to the integrity of the knee.”

And instead of “impenetrable rock,” that outrage is banging down

on one of the most sensitive points in your body. You know what kind of nerves are in your feet? The same ones that network into your genitals. Your feet are like a minnow bucket full of sensory neurons, all of them wriggling around in search of sensation. Stimulate those nerves just a little, and the impulse will rocket through your entire nervous system; that's why tickling your feet can overload the switchboard and cause your whole body to spasm.

No wonder South American dictators had a foot fetish when it came to breaking hard cases; the *bastinado*, the technique of tying victims down and beating the soles of their feet, was developed by the Spanish Inquisition and eagerly adopted by the world's sickest sadists. The Khmer Rouge and Saddam Hussein's sinister son Uday were big-time *bastinado* fans because they knew their anatomy; only the face and hands compare with the feet for instant-messaging capability to the brain. When it comes to sensing the softest caress or tiniest grain of sand, your toes are as finely wired as your lips and fingertips.

"So isn't there anything I can do?" I asked Dr. Torg.

He shrugged. "You can keep running, but you'll be back for more of these," he said, giving a little *ting* with his fingernail to the giant needle full of cortisone he was about to push into the bottom of my foot. I'd also need custom-made orthotics (\$400) to slip inside my motion-control running shoes (\$150 and climbing, and since I'd need to rotate two pairs, make it \$300). But that would just postpone the real big-ticket item: my inevitable next visit to his waiting room.

"Know what I'd recommend?" Dr. Torg concluded. "Buy a bike."

I thanked him, promised I'd take his advice, then immediately went behind his back to someone else. Doc Torg was getting up in years, I realized; maybe he'd gotten a little too conservative with his advice and a little too quick with his cortisone. A physician friend recommended a sports podiatrist who was also a marathoner, so I made an appointment for the following week.

The podiatrist took another X-ray, then probed my foot with his thumbs. "Looks like you've got cuboid syndrome," he concluded. "I can blast the inflammation out with some cortisone, but then you're going to need orthotics."

"Damn," I muttered. "That's just what Torg said."

He'd started to leave the room for the needle, but then he stopped short. "You already saw Joe Torg?"

"Yes."

"You already got a cortisone shot?"

"Uh, yeah."

"So what are you doing here?" he asked, suddenly looking impatient and a little suspicious, as if he thought I really enjoyed having needles shoved into the tenderest part of my foot. Maybe he suspected I was a sadomasochistic junkie who was addicted to both pain *and* painkillers.

"You realize Dr. Torg is the godfather of sports medicine, right? His diagnoses are usually well respected."

"I know. I just wanted to double-check."

"I'm not going to give you another shot, but we can schedule a fitting for the orthotics. And you should really think about finding some other activity besides running."

"Sounds good," I said. He was a better runner than I'd ever be, and he'd just confirmed the verdict of a doctor he readily admitted was the sensei of sports physicians. There was absolutely no arguing with his diagnosis. So I started looking for someone else.

It's not that I'm all that stubborn. It's not that I'm even all that crazy about running. If I totaled all the miles I'd ever run, half were aching drudgery. But it does say something that even though I haven't read *The World According to Garp* in twenty years, I've never forgotten one minor scene, and it ain't the one you're thinking of: I keep thinking back to the way Garp used to burst out his door in the middle of the workday for a five-mile run. There's something so universal about that sensation, the way running unites our two most primal impulses: fear and pleasure. We run when we're scared, we run when we're ecstatic, we run away from our problems and run around for a good time.

And 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, when more than two hundred runners set the trend by racing forty miles a day across the country in the Great American Footrace. Running then went dormant, only to catch fire again in the early '70s, when we were struggling to recover from Vietnam, the

Cold War, race riots, a criminal president, and the murders of three beloved leaders. And the third distance boom? One year after the September 11 attacks, trail-running suddenly became the fastest-growing outdoor sport in the country. Maybe it was a coincidence. Or maybe there's a trigger in the human psyche, a coded response that activates our first and greatest survival skill when we sense the raptors approaching. In terms of stress relief and sensual pleasure, running is what you have in your life before you have sex. The equipment and desire come factory installed; all you have to do is let 'er rip and hang on for the ride.

That's what I was looking for; not some pricey hunk of plastic to stick in my shoe, not a monthly cycle of painkillers, just a way to let 'er rip without tearing myself up. I didn't love running, but I *wanted* to. Which is what brought me to the door of M.D. No. 3: Dr. Irene Davis, an expert in biomechanics and head of the Running Injury Clinic at the University of Delaware.

Dr. Davis put me on a treadmill, first in my bare feet and then in three different types of running shoes. She had me walk, trot, and haul ass. She had me run back and forth over a force plate to measure the impact shock from my footfalls. Then I sat in horror as she played back the video.

In my mind's eye, I'm light and quick as a Navajo on the hunt. That guy on the screen, however, was Frankenstein's monster trying to tango. I was bobbing around so much, my head was disappearing from the top of the frame. My arms were slashing back and forth like an ump calling a player safe at the plate, while my size 13s clumped down so heavily it sounded like the video had a bongo backbeat.

If that wasn't bad enough, Dr. Davis then hit slow-mo so we could all settle back and really appreciate the way my right foot twisted out, my left knee dipped in, and my back bucked and spasmed so badly that it looked as if someone ought to jam a wallet between my teeth and call for help. How the hell was I even moving forward with all that up-down, side-to-side, fish-on-a-hook flopping going on?

"Okay," I said. "So what's the right way to run?"

"That's the eternal question," Dr. Davis replied.

As for the eternal answer . . . well, that was tricky. I might straighten out my stride and get a little more shock absorption if I

landed on my fleshy midfoot instead of my bony heel, *buuuuuut* . . . I might just be swapping one set of problems for another. Tinkering with a new gait can suddenly load the heel and Achilles with unaccustomed stress and bring on a fresh batch of injuries.

"Running is tough on the legs," Dr. Davis said. She was so gentle and apologetic, I could tell what else she was thinking: "Especially *your* legs, big fella."

I was right back where I'd started. After months of seeing specialists and searching physiology studies online, all I'd managed was to get my question flipped around and fired back at me:

How come my foot hurts?

Because running is bad for you.

Why is running bad for me?

Because it makes your foot hurt.

But *why*? Antelope don't get shin splints. Wolves don't ice-pack their knees. I doubt that 80 percent of all wild mustangs are annually disabled with impact injuries. It reminded me of a proverb attributed to Roger Bannister, who, while simultaneously studying medicine, working as a clinical researcher, and minting pithy parables, became the first man to break the four-minute mile: "Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up," Bannister said. "It knows it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle, or it will starve. It doesn't matter whether you're a lion or a gazelle—when the sun comes up, you'd better be running."

So why should every other mammal on the planet be able to depend on its legs except us? Come to think of it, how could a guy like Bannister charge out of the lab every day, pound around a hard cinder track in thin leather slippers, and not only get faster, but never get hurt? How come some of us can be out there running all lionlike and Bannisterish every morning when the sun comes up, while the rest of us need a fistful of ibuprofen before we can put our feet on the floor?

These were very good questions. But as I was about to discover, the only ones who knew the answers—the only ones who *lived* the answers—weren't talking.

Especially not to someone like me.

In the winter of 2003, I was on assignment in Mexico when I began flipping through a Spanish-language travel magazine. Suddenly, a photo of Jesus running down a rock slide caught my eye.

Closer inspection revealed that while maybe not Jesus, it was definitely a man in a robe and sandals sprinting down a mountain of rubble. I started translating the caption, but couldn't figure out why it was in the present tense; it seemed to be some kind of wishful Atlantean legend about an extinct empire of enlightened super-beings. Only gradually did I figure out that I was right about everything except the "extinct" and "wishful" parts.

I was in Mexico to track down a missing pop star and her secret brainwashing cult for *The New York Times Magazine*, but the article I was writing suddenly seemed a snore compared with the one I was reading. Freakish fugitive pop stars come and go, but the Tarahumara seemed to live forever. Left alone in their mysterious canyon hideaway, this small tribe of recluses had solved nearly every problem known to man. Name your category—mind, body, or soul—and the Tarahumara were zeroing in on perfection. It was as if they'd secretly turned their caves into incubators for Nobel Prize winners, all toiling toward the end of hatred, heart disease, shin splints, and greenhouse gases.

In Tarahumara Land, there was no crime, war, or theft. There was no corruption, obesity, drug addiction, greed, wife-beating, child abuse, heart disease, high blood pressure, or carbon emissions. They didn't get diabetes, or depressed, or even old: fifty-year-olds could outrun teenagers, and eighty-year-old great-granddads could hike marathon distances up mountainsides. Their cancer rates were barely detectable. The Tarahumara geniuses had even branched into economics, creating a one-of-a-kind financial system based on booze and random acts of kindness: instead of money, they traded favors and big tubs of corn beer.

You'd expect an economic engine fueled by alcohol and freebies to spiral into a drunken grab-fest, everyone double-fisting for themselves like bankrupt gamblers at a casino buffet, but in Tarahumara Land, it works. Perhaps it's because the Tarahumara are industrious and inhumanly honest; one researcher went as far as to speculate that

after so many generations of truthfulness, the Tarahumara brain was actually chemically incapable of forming lies.

And if being the kindest, happiest people on the planet wasn't enough, the Tarahumara were also the toughest: the only thing that rivaled their superhuman serenity, it seemed, was their superhuman tolerance for pain and *lechuguilla*, a horrible homemade tequila brewed from rattlesnake corpses and cactus sap. According to one of the few outsiders who'd ever witnessed a full-on Tarahumara rave, the partiers got so blitzed that wives began ripping each others' tops off in a bare-breasted wrestling match, while a cackling old man circled around trying to spear their butts with a corn cob. The husbands, meanwhile, gazed on in glassy-eyed paralysis. Cancún at spring break had nothing on the Barrancas under a harvest moon.

The Tarahumara would party like this all night, then roust themselves the next morning to face off in a running race that could last not two miles, not two hours, but *two full days*. According to the Mexican historian Francisco Almada, a Tarahumara champion once ran 435 miles, the equivalent of setting out for a jog in New York City and not stopping till you were closing in on Detroit. Other Tarahumara runners reportedly went three hundred miles at a pop. That's nearly twelve full marathons, back to back to back, while the sun rose and set and rose again.

And the Tarahumara weren't cruising along smooth, paved roads, either, but scrambling up and down steep canyon trails formed only by their own feet. Lance Armstrong is one of the greatest endurance athletes of all time, and he could barely shuffle through his first marathon despite sucking down an energy gel nearly every mile. (Lance's text message to his ex-wife after the New York City Marathon: "Oh. My. God. Ouch. Terrible.") Yet these guys were knocking them out a dozen at a time?

In 1971, an American physiologist trekked into the Copper Canyons and was so blown away by Tarahumara athleticism that he had to reach back twenty-eight hundred years for a suitable scale to rank it on. "Probably not since the days of the ancient Spartans has a people achieved such a high state of physical conditioning," Dr. Dale Groom concluded when he published his findings in the *American Heart Journal*. Unlike the Spartans, however, the Tarahumara are

benign as bodhisattvas; they don't use their superstrength to kick ass, but to live in peace. "As a culture, they're one of the great unsolved mysteries," says Dr. Daniel Noveck, a University of Chicago anthropologist who specializes in the Tarahumara.

The Tarahumara are so mysterious, in fact, they even go by an alias. Their real name is Rarámuri—the Running People. They were dubbed "Tarahumara" by conquistadores who didn't understand the tribal tongue. The bastardized name stuck because the Rarámuri remained true to form, running away rather than hanging around to argue the point. Answering aggression with their heels has always been the Rarámuri way. Ever since Cortés's armored invaders came jangling into their homeland and then through subsequent invasions by Pancho Villa's roughriders and Mexican drug barons, the Tarahumara have responded to attacks by running farther and faster than anyone could follow, retreating ever deeper into the Barrancas.

God, they must be unbelievably disciplined, I thought. *Total focus and dedication. The Shaolin monks of running.*

Well, not quite. When it comes to marathoning, the Tarahumara prefer more of a Mardi Gras approach. In terms of diet, lifestyle, and belly fire, they're a track coach's nightmare. They drink like New Year's Eve is a weekly event, tossing back enough corn beer in a year to spend every third day of their adult lives either buzzed or recovering. Unlike Lance, the Tarahumara don't replenish their bodies with electrolyte-rich sports drinks. They don't rebuild between workouts with protein bars; in fact, they barely eat any protein at all, living on little more than ground corn spiced up by their favorite delicacy, barbecued mouse. Come race day, the Tarahumara don't train or taper. They don't stretch or warm up. They just stroll to the starting line, laughing and bantering . . . then go like hell for the next forty-eight hours.

How come they're not crippled? I wondered. It's as if a clerical error entered the stats in the wrong columns: shouldn't *we*—the ones with state-of-the-art running shoes and custom-made orthotics—have the zero casualty rate, and the Tarahumara—who run way more, on way rockier terrain, in shoes that barely qualify as shoes—be constantly banged up?

Their legs are just tougher, since they've been running all their lives, I thought, before catching my own goof. *But that means they should be*

hurt more, not less: if running is bad for your legs, then running lots should be a lot worse.

I shoved the article aside, feeling equal parts intrigued and annoyed. Everything about the Tarahumara seemed backward, taunting, as irritatingly ungraspable as a Zen master's riddles. The toughest guys were the gentlest; battered legs were the bounciest; the healthiest people had the crappiest diet; the illiterate race was the wisest; the guys working the hardest were having the most fun. . . .

And what did running have to do with all this? Was it a coincidence that the world's most enlightened people were also the world's most amazing runners? Seekers used to climb the Himalayas for that kind of wisdom—and all this time, I realized, it was just a hop across the Texas border.