

Imposter, Poser, or A Real Runner?

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Here in Boulder we work with and train alongside world class athletes. We have humble friends who have Olympic silver medals tucked away in drawers. We swim in the lane next to the triathlete who just won the Ironman championship. On the climbing wall, we look up at experts who just returned from conquering the Dolomites. When you live with and train among la crème de la crème, it's awfully hard not to develop imposter syndrome — feeling like you don't belong or deserve to call yourself a real runner.

Looks are deceiving here in Boulder. We live in a town where a 45 year old looks like a 35 year old and beats a 21 year old collegiate runner (all while pushing a stroller in a skirt). That 21 year old might feel like an imposter after being beaten by a masters runner until she realizes that runner was a four-time All-American track star.

And at some point this All-American, now middle-of-the-pack, runner begins to question her own legitimacy. How she used to define a real runner (a top ten finish, a sub-3 hour marathon, a sponsorship), something she identified with, no longer applies to her.

The “retired” athlete identity crisis is a very real diagnosis in our community. “Do I just fade away or fall into another category?” a runner recently asked me after claiming that her performance is now on par with participating not competing. Another friend questioned his legitimacy to continue competing. At 47 he worried his 4:50 mile wasn't fast enough. If you once were able to run a sub-18 minute 5k, can you still say you are a “sub-18 minute 5k” runner just as a world record holder can still say they are “world record holder” after it's broken?

My running coach and dear friend Steve Jones set the marathon world record (2:08:05) in Chicago in 1984. A self-proclaimed “journeyman runner”, Jones came to the sport with an iron will and very little money in his pockets. His accomplishments in many ways paved the way for the popularity of the sport. However, his comments were recently the target of an online debate over what it means to be a real marathoner. In an interview with **Competitor Magazine** editor Brian Metzler, Jones said, *“I don’t believe that starting and finishing a marathon makes you a marathoner. I don’t believe that. If you’re racing it to go as fast as you can, that’s completely different than being part of an event and just wanting to get from point A to point B.”*

I understood why people were enraged. But I also roughly understood where he was coming from. I say “roughly” because, unlike my coach, I will never come close to setting any world record. Having been both a runner simply happy to complete a marathon and a runner driven to break three hours (which I’ve yet to do), I too believe there’s a difference between racing and participating. And yet, it’s not the talent that distinguishes you, but the grit you use to become the best possible XYZ you can be.

Whether or not someone is enjoying running also defines someone who is a real runner. A boy whose parents forced him to join the cross country team and a girl whose volleyball coach made her run a mile as punishment for being late will never call themselves real runners. There was no delight in the action. There is a great deal of difference between doing and being. Just because I walk doesn’t make me a walker nor does eating food make me a foodie.

It’s not about how fast you are, what new records you set (because you’ve created a new category), how long you can last before your kidneys fail you, or whether or not you wear the newest compression socks and talk about fartleks at breakfast. Do you love the identity because of how it “looks” on you when you wear it? Or do you love the identity because of how its real experiences feel in your body? The tattered Velveteen Rabbit was very real because the little boy loved him

based on the experiences they’d shared together.

A writer friend, new to trail running, now frequently posts pictures to twitter of his recent running adventures he’s writing about for big magazines. I often curse out loud when I see these posts, “Who does he think he is calling himself a trail runner, when I’ve been doing it since I was 14?! Where are his knee scars from countless falls?” And then I step off my mountain peak and remind myself nobody really owns the patent on what makes a real trail runner. My judge-bug takes over when I feel his imposturous claim, without much investment, seems unearned. It cheapens my uniqueness, or as my coach says, “It devalues (my identity as a runner).”

We are equally as guilty of feeling the effects of imposter syndrome as spreading the disease. When you complain about having run a 3:30 marathon when your goal was sub three hours or having only run 15 miles instead of the planned 20, don’t forget to consider your company—perhaps runners who run 20 miles a week. Our words make them feel like imposters—unworthy of calling themselves runners.

In the end only we are the ones responsible for feeling like our accomplishments are less than what they were because others are now doing the same (just differently). I cast off the inner voice of inadequacy with the help of Eleanor Roosevelt’s voice:

“Nobody can make you inferior without your consent.”

When I begin to feel the effects of the imposter-bug (self-doubt, unrealistic expectations, lack of celebration), I remind myself what it might feel like to be running anywhere else in the world where you don’t routinely bump into an Olympian in the grocery aisle. I imagine all the people in the world who ask me how long is my marathon, who tell me they only run when chased, and who think the trails I run are for animals. Gaining perspective grants us the grace to validate and respect ourselves and others in our Boulder community for the athletic identities we claim as real.