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Distance Running as a Joint Accomplishment: an ethnomethodological view

Dr John Hockey (University of Gloucestershire)
Dr Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (University of
Lincoln)



- ▶ A bit of a rough session for J. this evening. Lots of heat all day and the humidity just builds relentlessly, and lots of pollen too, so pretty tough conditions for distance running – particularly for someone with asthma.
- ▶ Up the slope by the tennis courts she was labouring hard, and I could hear her breathing much more heavily than normal when she usually just floats up quietly. By the time we got to the bottom of the park she was sucking in the oxygen desperately like she was racing, so I dropped the pace and she gave me a little smile and grateful nod. (Log 1)



- ▶ Saturday morning and a well duff run for J. That good old Anglo Saxon F word erupted with passion every hundred metres or so. Still, it got him around 7 miles effectively enough, especially as he swore profusely about the cursed work leaving his legs dead for the running.
- ▶ We're both exhausted from the overwork at the moment, fed up of how it leaves us with nothing for the running. I know well by now that it's best for me at such junctures to leave him to his own devices, whilst I hang just behind his shoulder and let him set the pace. (Log 2)



- ▶ When J is running well, he is usually very compact, very neat, very efficient; he doesn't waste any energy in unnecessary movement. Conversely, when he's struggling, not running well, the contrast is immediately apparent.
- ▶ This morning was our last session of the week. He was really tired and his left arm, which normally swings straight front to back, started to swing across his body, trying to propel him forward against the fatigue. That always happens when he gets knackered, I've noticed (and remarked on it) over the years; it's like a red flag, because I know other 'symptoms' will usually follow: his stride length shortening, he begins to stumble and sway around, then I know I really do have to ease off the pace a bit.
- ▶ Today, though, I was exhausted too, it's been a long hard haul at the office and chalk face, we need some chill-down time... (Log 2)



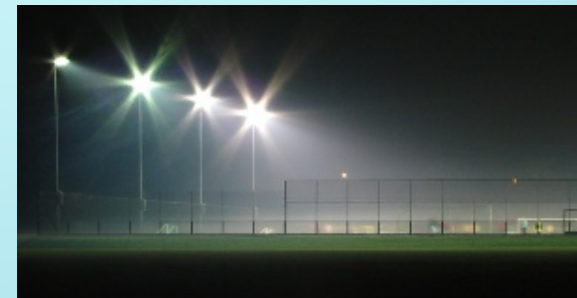
- ▶ It's noticeable how we move apart and come back together again. J has always been better than me at downhill running, she's more agile, supple and sure footed. It reminded me today when we were out running on the hills – she will go away from me in terms of pace, and plunge down (somewhat recklessly at times; but then she hasn't had so many fell-running injuries!) regardless of how rough the ground is. I'm slower, more cautious, considered, in terms of descending and I always try to choose a path as smooth as possible. So, at the bottom, she will usually run a little circle or run on the spot whilst looking at the view, so as to meet up with me again. (Log 1)



- ▶ I am hyper conscious of J's form on particular occasions. She can suffer from exercise-induced asthma, which is an absolute drag and means that pollen and pollution levels can impact on her running day to day. She can be having a good week of training generally, and then suddenly, for example if we're running in a traffic-heavy area with lots of exhaust fumes, she's having a really bad time. That happened today and she 'came off the back' all of a sudden - drifting well behind me. I think it was probably all the thick pollen through the fields. I was particularly aware of it when we hit any hills, even small ones, where I am normally stronger. Once I realised she was struggling, I eased the pace a bit, making sure she could still run fairly close behind. (Log 1)



- ▶ Running the park route during the long winter nights mostly depends on enough light filtering over to our route from the floodlights of the nearby athletics stadium. Usually it's fine when athletics training is scheduled, but occasionally for some unknown reason the lights are not on at the allotted hour or they go off suddenly. When that happens we are unexpectedly plunged into darkness. Usually we run side by side where the route around the park edge is barely lit by adjacent street lamps, the arcs of which provide just enough illumination for us to be able to make out a faint pathway over the grass. That's fine unless the floodlights go out suddenly, and we find ourselves at the section where the local mini golf course begins, with its deep, potentially ankle-twisting/breaking holes... [contd]



- ▶ ...Without the lighting, and without the summer flags in place to warn the unwary runner, the holes can be distinctly hazardous. My myopic eyes are pretty poor in the gloom, even in the twilight, so as we approach the golf hazard zone, J. often grunts, 'On me!' – meaning he should take the lead for that particular section and I must follow 'obediently' in his wake. Inevitably, that sometimes leads to a few strides of discontent, dispute and jostling, more often than not ritualised, sometimes jocular, together with pointed comments about my (woefully short of) 20/20 vision! (Log 2)

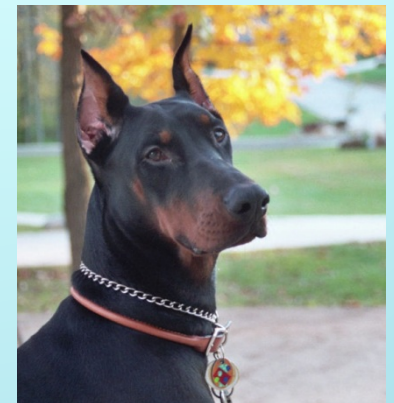
- ▶ A tarmac path leads to the narrow, dark, dank underpass and on either side there is soft ground, often muddy and slippery, and also quite steeply angled and rough, difficult to run on. Normally we both run on the path. Often, however, there are individuals, linked couples or small groups of people walking there, strung right across our path. The usual behaviour, observed over many years, is for people to keep walking towards us either singly or in group formation, so that we are then forced to stride on to the soft, slippery ground on either side of them.
- ▶ It's not as if we are unseen, or come across these people unexpectedly, because we have monitored their eye contact regularly. It seems clear that they are doggedly determined to plod on regardless, and not cede space to us. So we are now well used to predicting their behaviour and therefore move on to the soft ground. Sometimes, though, we direct a quizzical look in their direction, just to challenge gently their presumptions! (Log 2)



- ▶ Thinking about what happens when training, it's become apparent that part of training together is being aware of what's going on out there on the route. That awareness is for myself and also for J. We both have a litany of incidents when negative things have happened 'out there', so we monitor what is happening for each other. Sometimes she sees dodgy things developing faster than I do, and vice versa.
- ▶ I, for example, in my running time have had half a house brick dropped on my head from a railway bridge by a couple of under 10-year olds, been attacked by a young Doberman Pincher in a Nottingham park and been hit in the left ear by a heavy handbag swung by a female teenager – 19 miles into a 20 mile training session on a summer Saturday afternoon, crossing the George Street bridge in Newport! All occasions when I was not aware enough.

J. has been grabbed at, lunged at, bitten by a dog that sneaked up behind her, hit accidentally but very hard with a cricket bat wielded by a young lad... That's been hammered home, so there is now a perpetual surveillance by both of us, of what is approaching down the road...

(Log 1)



- ▶ On the park in the spring and golf is in ‘full swing’!... Sometimes... you get groups of teenagers playing. What they do, when the mood takes them, is to hit the ball directly at us or very near, often calling out ‘fore’ [meaning ‘watch out afore’] at the last minute and then breaking into collective sniggers if they detect any reaction at all from us, the more anxious we look, the better, it seems!
- ▶ So we watch, we monitor, we periodically look ahead when out training, particular along certain routes. It’s like a film unfolding, watching what’s building up; often you’ve seen the same scenario play in front of you countless times before, so you know what action is likely to occur... Whichever of us sees that kind of troublesome group first will then mutter: ‘idiots/dickheads to left/right/over there!’, indicating to the other that it’s definitely advisable to follow a different trajectory.
- ▶ Avoidance is the usual favoured strategy as there is no point in confronting the kids if they start that kind of rubbish. Anyway, confrontation requires stopping the training and the momentum of the run, and also, more seriously, might mean being hit by a stinging hard golf ball in the quads or somewhere even more vulnerable, with consequent time off training if the bruising is very severe. In sum: not worth the hassle! (Log 2)



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