

# Born to Run Summary

By Christopher McDougall

*'The best runner leaves no tracks'* (Tao Te Ching).

*Born to Run* is an eclectic and deeply fascinating exploration of running. Weaving together folklore, cutting edge science, anthropology, investigative journalism, and lashings of bravery and determination, McDougall seeks to find out once and for all if humans are supposed to run.

It all began with the simple question, 'How come my foot hurts?' In a bid to answer this, McDougall approached the best sports medicine specialists in the US, and asked the best brains in the field why incidents of running injuries are so high. Dr. Torg, who is in large part to thank for the field of sports medicine, proclaimed, 'Running is your problem.' When a world-renowned expert warns you off running, and backs this up with statistics that eight out of ten runners are injured or hurt every year, it's hard to argue. Nonetheless, our author went for a second opinion. The opinion was the same. In the world of running, the outliers are the ones who are injury-free.

Still, this notion of humans "aren't supposed to run," nagged at McDougall, and he couldn't accept that something so natural should be so bad for us. And then, through a serendipitous act of good fortune, he came across the mysterious Tarahumara (or Rarámuri) and a group of other eccentric individuals who were throwing anything but caution to the wind when it came to pushing their bodies.

We'll briefly explore one of the most captivating stories on endurance, humanity, empathy, and joy. We'll learn about the subtle and beautiful art of simplicity, and how finding the ultimate sense of flow and serenity, could be as straightforward as heading out and putting one foot in front of the other.

## Does Bruce Springsteen Have a Point?

*'There's something so universal about that sensation, the way running unites our two most primal impulses: fear and pleasure.'*

Bruce Springsteen dedicated a whole album to the idea that we're "born to run." We run towards things when we're excited and happy; we run away from things when we're scared or angry. When things get tough, our instinct is often to run, even if our bodies don't want to.

'In terms of stress relief and sensual pleasure, running is what you have in your life before you have sex.' So why is something so natural so "bad" for us, and is there a "right way" to run? Something wasn't adding up; how could Roger Bannister break the four-minute mile on a cinder track wearing leather plimsols, and how could the Tarahumara run for up to 48 hours in nothing more than a pair of handmade sandals? Are running shoes part of the problem, underdelivering and over-promising?

## A Glimpse at the Tarahumara

*'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?'*

How far could you run without stopping?

The Tarahumara Indians can run up to 300 miles at a time without stopping. Also known as the Rarámuri or running people, they have honed the ability to run over treacherous terrain without sophisticated running shoes. A champion runner once ran 435 miles nonstop.

The legend of this isolated tribe is shrouded in mystery because they live in solitude. The Tarahumara live deep within the Copper Canyons in Mexico, and are intensely secretive and wary of strangers. They stay away from the outside world, and lead independent and simple lives. When they came face-to-face with the conquistadors, they didn't hang around to find out what these strangers wanted. They treated them as they do everything else; they turned on their heels and ran away to live in peace.

As the world's best runners, they leave no tracks. They're lightfooted, run over invisible trails, and leave almost nothing by way of carbon footprint. They're a peaceful community with no sense of hatred, no depression, virtually disease-free, and have no incidence of cancer. The crime rate is non-existent. However, they aren't exactly moderate. The Tarahumara like to party, and their economy not only runs on doing favors for one another, but on beer.

For the Tarahumara, running is everything. They eat to run and fuel up on pinole, beans, tortillas, and a magical elixir called iskiate. Running is the lifeblood of the tribe, and it's nurtured and encouraged from childhood to adulthood. At the heart of this ethos around running is the high-intensity and fast-paced game Rarájipari. The game consists of two balls and two teams, and the idea is to kick and chase your team's ball over the vast

terrain. Games can last up to 48 hours and are part of the social fabric of the tribe. The game is a metaphor for life and endurance running, 'You never know how hard it will be. You never know how it will end. You can't control it. You can only adjust.'

## Chasing the White Horse

*'We don't get old because we run, we get old because we stop running.'*

To gain more insight into the Tarahumara, McDougall sought out the mysterious character "Caballo Blanco." Caballo Blanco, also known as Micah True, was born Michael Randall Hickman. After becoming a professional fighter and suffering from a painful break-up, he decided to rethink his life. He went to the Barrancas del Cobre, or Copper Canyons, to learn from the Tarahumara.

Caballo was curious to learn more about this tribe that appeared to be genetically hardwired to run, and so he stepped into their world, and found the "best place on earth to run." McDougall had heard the legend of this outsider who became accepted by the tribe, but he was dubious about these snippets of folklore. Nonetheless, after several "you just missed him," they came face-to-face in a hotel lobby.

Then the White Horse, in his running shorts and battered Teva sandals, began spinning a yarn that would culminate into one of the most extraordinary events of our age.

## Setting the Stage

*'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.'*

In the early 1990s, Rick Fisher and Kitty Williams convinced a group of Tarahumara runners to participate in the Leadville 100 ultramarathon. The 1992 race was an unmitigated disaster for the culture-shocked Tarahumara. However, in 1993 and 1994, they smashed the course, and the 1993 race was one by a 52-year-old Victoriano Churro. And in 1994, the Tarahumara team beat Ann Trason in a record-breaking course race of 17:30. Ann Trason still holds the record for the fastest female runner at Leadville.

However, the run of the Tarahumara tribe at Leadville was short-lived. Things with Rick Fisher soured, and they retreated back to the Copper Canyons, never to be seen on American soil again. But the Leadville 100 opened up some interesting questions. For example, how come nearly all women finish Leadville, while fewer than half of men do? In fact, 90% of women complete the race, while less than 50% of men finish. Generally, women are better at ultramarathons, and the gap between female and male athletes gets smaller as the race gets longer.

The more McDougall tried to figure out running, the more complicated it became.

## **What Is “It” About Running?**

*'He'd figured out the body, so now it was on to the brain. Specifically: How do you make anyone actually want to do any of this stuff? How do you flip the internal switch that changes us all back into the Natural Born Runners we once were? Not just in history, but in our own lifetimes.'*

McDougall sets to work finding out the magic ingredient of running. Advertising and shoe companies will have you believe that it's all about the running gear, particularly the shoes. Here's the thing, this isn't under-researched. There have been loads of peer-reviewed studies on running shoes, and none of them can prove that high-tech shoes decrease injuries or increase performance. In fact, as running shoe technology is expanding, injuries are not coming down one iota. Running-related injuries remain exceedingly high. Every year 65%-80% of runners suffer from injuries, and it's not just beginners, but seasoned athletes.

Some of the best conditioned runners in the best shoes that money can buy are suffering from everything from shin splints, to Achilles heels, to plantar fasciitis. Runners wearing top-of-the-range shoes are 123% more likely to get injured. The evidence suggests that our feet prefer older and more used running shoes where there's less cushioning. Research also indicates that we have a greater sense of foot control with less cushioning. This is because our feet naturally seek out stability, so if we expect a cushioned landing, we preempt this and overcompensate. Experts warn that instead of creating thicker shoes with more cushioning, we need to be making them thinner.

Joe Vigil, an expert in long-distance running who has studied endurance athletes worldwide, believes there's a missing link in terms of the psychology of running. Vigil argues that people hate running, because they've lost the sense of freedom, joy, and glee that it brings. If we look towards children for inspiration, we see this mindset in action. Children run all the time; we tell them to slow down and to take it easy. We reign

them in. The Tarahumara never slow down or take it easy; they run because they're inspired and love it. They run with a sense of wonder and ecstasy.

Furthermore, Vigil explains that modern running lost its magic because it became about, "What do I get in return?" and "What's in it for me?" We can see how this manifested if we look at the timeline. In the 1970s, there were a host of really fast, really talented American runners. However, they got slower while the world got faster. And it's not about the rest of the world getting faster; it's about the fact that Americans were slowing down. And, they were slowing down because there was no financial incentive to run further and faster.

McDougall uses the example of Emil Zátopek to illustrate the attitude runners should embrace. Zátopek was a self-trained athlete who won three gold medals at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952. He won the 5000 and 10000 meters respectively, and then had a rush of blood to the head and decided to go in for the marathon. No one expected him to amount to anything, but he raced to the finish line with an infectious smile, with everyone in the crowd cheering. Some runners complained that he would try to chat with them during a race, and he was considered eccentric by many. Many people also wondered how someone could be so cheerful and happy during such grueling training regimes. He just loved running and embraced the spirit of kindness, compassion, and love. Nothing encompasses this more than when he gave one of his Olympic gold medals to Ron Clarke, 'Not out of friendship but because you deserve it.'

Ultrarunning is a pretty pure sport because there's no money or real fame in it. As a result, there's no doping because there's hardly any prize money up for grabs. Hence, people who run long distances do it because they can't help themselves. Vigil explains, 'There are two goddesses in

your heart.' There's 'The Goddess of Wisdom and the Goddess of Wealth. Everyone thinks they need to get wealth first, and wisdom will come. So they concern themselves with chasing money. But they have it backwards. You have to give your heart to the Goddess of Wisdom, give her all your love and attention, and the Goddess of Wealth will become jealous, and follow you.' The secret is to "ask nothing from your running."

## Learning To Run

*'When you run on the earth and run with the earth, you can run forever.'*

To search for the perfect stride, McDougall asked for Caballo's help. It sounds like a cliché, but most of us need to relearn how to run. We need to go back to the basics, get rid of the fancy gear, and stick to simple eating. Many of the top runners advocate for "eating like a poor person."

The first lesson in running is to take what the trail, path, or road ahead of you gives you. Learn the trail and respect it. Analyze all of the obstacles and use some of them to propel you forward. Running is as much about the trail as it is about your presence on it.

The second lesson is, 'Think *Easy, Light, Smooth, and Fast.*' When you begin a run, make everything as easy as possible. When you're running up a steep hill, chunk it up and adopt a mindset to get to the top. You'll soon realize that your head often makes things more challenging than they seem, so shift your perspective and focus on the beauty and distractions around you. Run with a smile. Seek out enjoyment and adopt an easy attitude. Once you've got the hang of "easy," lightness comes next. Try running nimbly and with light feet. Remember that the best runners leave no trace. Running with lightness also prevents injury and conserves



energy. Easiness and lightness culminate in a smooth and regular running style, and a natural rhythm. And once you've got this waxed, speed will take care of itself.

From a psychological perspective, we need to accept that running is physically and mentally exhausting. This is one of the reasons why so many people hate it. How you decide to deal with exhaustion ultimately determines what kind of runner you become. Some talk about embracing it; others talk about conquering it like a beast. However, one of the most profound methods of dealing with exhaustion is to learn to love it. If you love the beast, it cannot conquer you. Emil Zátopek, Scott Jurek, Caballo Blanco, Jenn Shelton, and the Tarahumara show that running is about ecstasy and being part of a collective. It's about helping others and taking the focus off the self. And while there may be some form of competition, it means nothing if there's no compassion.

## The Greatest Race We Never Saw

*"When I'm out on a long run," she continued, "the only thing in life that matters is finishing the run... Everything quietens down, and the only thing going on is pure flow. It's just me and the movement and the motion."*

Caballo and McDougall collaborate to stage a race between the Tarahumara and a few of the world's greatest ultrarunners. It's a brazen and bold move, given that the debacle of Leadville had previously spooked the Tarahumara. Nonetheless, they put their trust in the crazy white dude, and Caballo and McDougall set about assembling a group of racers.

It may sound like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go head-to-head with the world's most extraordinary running tribe, but the Copper

Canyons are a death trap. Jaguars, poisonous snakes, sheer cliff faces, the heat, and drug cartels thrown in for good measure, make it a veritable hotbed of potential ways to die. However, as we learn, ultrarunners are not of this earth, and they're all completely bonkers. The ragtag team consists of the level-headed Scott Jurek, the persistent talker "Barefoot Ted," "The Kids," Billy Barnett and Jenn Shelton, the "naked coach" Eric Orton, photographer slash epic runner Luis Escobar, McDougall, and Caballo.

The adventure into the Copper Canyons is the stuff of legends, and to what extent the author takes creative license is much debated. However, it doesn't seem to matter because it's a heady mixture of the sublime and the utterly bizarre, that does nothing but make one want to head out and just start running immediately. The strangest race ever organized galvanized an army of runners, and trail running has exploded as a sport. Between 2016 and 2019, there has been a 68% growth in the sport.

## **In Conclusion**

*"Running is the same way," Eric explained. "Learn it wrong, and you'll never know how good it can feel."*

Flow, curiosity, determination, grit, mindset. In the land of self-help, we can read all the books on these topics, but maybe the key is to just step outside our front doors and see where our feet and our minds will take us? Many people talk about extreme athletes as if they have a sense of danger and a kind of death wish, but actually, it all comes down to an intense curiosity about the world and themselves.

The Tarahumara aren't great runners, they're great athletes, and they have always been great athletes. World-renowned researcher Louis

Liebenberg asked the question, 'Know why people run marathons?' 'Because running is rooted in our collective imagination, and our imagination is rooted in running.' And here's the thing, we're naturally good at endurance running, and the human body can run for long stretches. Running is also rooted in equality. 19-year-olds can compete with 64-year-olds. Women are often better at endurance running than men are, and best of all it's free.

So why do so many people hate it? A lot comes down to the body-mind conflict. Endurance is about conserving enough energy in the tank, but so often our brains undermine our persistence. They've also got lazy because survival has become easier – why should we run when we can drive? Furthermore, running has turned into "an assembly line" practice. We need to be more unpredictable with our bodies, get out of familiar routines and act like kids. We should be looking to use our bodies in new ways, and to be curious. However, when it comes to running there's one routine you should nail, and that's "easy, light, smooth, and fast."

At its heart, racing is about camaraderie and community. We race to be with each other. Scott Jurek maintains that sometimes it's good to hang back and support the runners at the back. He explains, 'Other runners try to disassociate from fatigue by blasting iPods or imagining the roar of the crowd in Olympic Stadium.' Scott believes it's simpler than that, 'It's easy to get outside yourself when you're thinking about someone else.'

We all have one thing in common. We were born to run.