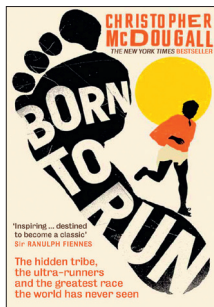


# Life & Times Books

## Born to Run: the Hidden Tribe, the Ultra-Runners and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen

Christopher McDougall

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### ANCESTRAL STRIDES

I first read *Born to Run* 10 years ago. Back then I was firmly of the belief that running was only worthwhile when chasing down a ball. I'd tried jogging but found it painful, boring, and frankly couldn't see the point. Halfway through the book my excitement to hit the road was uncontainable and I went straight out and doubled my previous longest run. Running was transformed from a slog to a joy.

In recent years, pregnancies and illness have taken their toll and I've lost some of my enthusiasm. When lockdown narrowed our horizons and limited our options for entertainment, I was delighted to hear that old friends who have never previously been athletically inclined hitting the streets to pound out some frustration and spend some time away from their loved ones!

So, I decided to return to *Born to Run* to see if it could re-ignite my passion. The book introduces the reader to the Tarahumara tribe who live a reclusive existence in Mexico's Copper Canyon. The Tarahumara have a tradition of running long distances of up to 200 miles at a time for inter-village communication and transportation, as well as for recreation and competition. They cover these distances wearing a minimalist sandal. They seem incredible, almost superhuman: performing seemingly impossible feats of endurance for fun. Here is the central theme of the book: that they are simply doing what humans are designed to do.

The book describes the 'endurance running hypothesis', which suggests that humans evolved as persistence hunters. Our bipedal forms allow us to vary our breathing patterns when running independently of our strides, whereas four-legged animals are obliged to breathe with every two paces. As a result, humans can chase prey for hours or days until the animal literally drops with exhaustion. There's some persuasive anatomical evidence to support this theory: humans have large gluteal muscles, much larger than are necessary for walking, and much larger than our ancestors or the modern great apes. The plantar arch of the human foot has an elastic spring function generating energy for running but not for walking. This complex arch is key to another of the book's themes: running injuries. The author's own attempts to run long distances had been beset by injury and he turned to the Tarahumara's style for ideas on how to run injury free.

As running shoes became more padded and complex in their design in the 1970s and 80s, the rates of running injuries started to rise. As every good bridge builder knows, arches become weaker if you provide support from below. When Nike *et al* provide cushioning for our soles and arch support, they are in fact undermining our foot's own structure. What's more, thickly padded soles remove our foot's connection to the ground, allowing us to run with poorer form. If you take the shoes away, all runners naturally revert to a Tarahumaran-style upright, short-stepping form with a mid-forefoot strike which makes best use of the body's inbuilt shock absorption features and reduces the risk of injury.

Indeed, after training in the Tarahumaran style, McDougall manages to complete a 50-mile race through the Copper Canyon. McDougall's infectious enthusiasm and consummate storytelling make for an engaging read and provide just the dose of escapism required for these dire times.

What's more, you might just start to believe *you* were born to run and, once you believe that, there'll be no stopping you.

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