

# Going Nowhere Fast

Of all the runners in this year's New York City Marathon, the most unusual, by any estimate, will be among the group that calls itself "The Robert Wilson Brigade." Named after the esteemed dramatist (*Einstein on the Beach, The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud, et cetera*), who is known among other things for his interest in "slow motion" and his use of tedium as a dramatic device, the Wilson Brigade is a group of runners who value slowness rather than speed. Like others in the race, they will measure their accomplishment by the time they take to finish, but these iconoclasts, recognizable by their electric-blue T-shirts with the turtle on the chest, will be the only participants for whom more is less and less more. A Wilsoner who runs the 26.2-mile distance in *less* than seven hours will be automatically suspended from the group. Several among their ranks point with pride to ten-hour marathons, and one claims to have used twelve hours, twenty-five minutes, forty-three seconds to complete the Boston Marathon last April.

The brigade was formed by T. Krishna Murphy, a thirty-four-year old Irish-Indian (Irish father, Indian mother) from Madras. An accomplished distance runner in college, Murphy, or T.M., as he is known to his disciples, turned his attention to the marathon after graduation and, before his conversion to Slow Distance, had lowered his time to a very respectable 2:23:21 (at Muscle Shoals, in 1972). The revelations that led to Wilsoning came to him in January, 1974, when an interview with Frank Shorter appeared in *Runner's World*. The statement that impressed Murphy was in reply to a question concerning marathon speed. "It may well be," Shorter said, "that a slow marathon takes more out of you than a fast one. Don't forget: the slower your time, the longer you have to endure." T.M. says this statement changed his life, leading him to his now famous theory that speed is a narcotic, a drug we use to escape anxiety. "If slow marathons are harder than fast ones, why do we reward those who run fast? I say it is because speed is an expression of our cultural disease, the embodiment of a technological ethos that makes

us rush through our lives as if we can't wait to get them over. Shorter made me understand that the real challenge is to run slow, not fast."

Murphy turned his training pattern inside out. His morning ten-mile run, which three months before had required sixty-three minutes, became a fifteen-miler that took four hours. To eliminate what he calls the "problem" of his long stride, he designed a special belt that he tied to his legs and shortened gradually until, after nine months, he had brought his stride down from the forty-seven inches his coaches had admired to its present fifteen inches, which he calls "the no-stride" (this belt, incidentally, was marketed last winter by Tao Industries of Northern California under the trademark "Krishnabelt").

His new training was far more difficult, he says, than anything he'd done before. There was less physical pain (any workout that contains physical pain he calls "pathological") but in its place was an insufferable boredom that delighted him. "There are those who fear boredom and devote their energies to avoiding it," he wrote, "but not us, not Wilsoners. We welcome it! Tolerance for boredom is tolerance for anxiety, and that's what we seek to develop. Not leg strength or some brute, macho fantasy of courage, but patience, tranquility, an ability to be present in any given time and space, a freedom from the need for entertainment and distraction. That's why Wilsoners don't go to movies or watch TV. For us such behavior is merely speed in other forms."

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Although just forty-seven runners will compete under the Wilson banner in the New York marathon, the brigade claims a membership of 234 from nineteen countries, including the People's Republic of China and Tibet. Murphy is confident that Wilsoners will become a substantial presence in the world of international athletics. In his view, the brigade is a revolutionary movement, a reaction against widespread disease. "People go out to track meets and cheer the sprinters. Can you imagine? That's like cheering junkies when they shoot up. Speed is the death instinct concretized! The 100-meter dash is psychodrama, an experiment in group psychosis. And the idea of running a marathon against the stopwatch is comparable to measuring sexual capacity by the speed with

which you can reach orgasm. What we're after, if you like, is making love as long as possible."

Scientific support has come from Charles "Baba" Limbic, the radical Romanian neurophysiologist whose work with rats confirms most of the hypotheses that led to Wilsoning. Limbic, famous for his work on the "neurology of desire" and "impatience" and especially his identification of the particular cell-bundles in rats' brains that are responsible for "ambition," had discovered Slow Distance independently when he found that rats on slow exercise wheels were "neurologically superior" to those on fast wheels. By "neurological superiority" he meant of course that their "ambition-centers" were smaller and that they were therefore less "anxious" and more "content." Others have questioned this definition, but Limbic claims proof of it through autopsy. Indeed, last winter he published photographs taken by electron microscope that purport to compare the "ambition-centers" of rats from different wheels and to demonstrate conclusively the superiority of "Wilsonian" over "conventional" rats.

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The ultimate measure of Wilsoning's success may lie in the fact that, like all important movements, it has spawned its own dissidents. The groups that have attracted particular attention are the "Giacomettis," who not only take their name from the great Swiss sculptor but attempt in races to emulate his work; the "Neurologists," who consider themselves Limbic's disciples; and the "Neurowilsoners," who claim they have joined Murphy's original vision to that of the Neurologists.

Giacomettis believe they have found the ultimate realization of Slow Distance. Says their founder, the Tibetan monk Chogyam Pumaddidas, "If the problem is motion, why indulge it?" For Pumaddidas and his disciples, the true anxiety for a runner lies in "not-running," and the ultimate drug, therefore, is running, slow or fast. Thus, Giacomettis, like other runners, congregate around the starting line at races, but take only one step beyond it, whereupon they freeze in poses similar to Giacometti sculptures. These poses, which Pumaddidas calls "asanas," will be held for lengths of time approximating Wilsonian levels, anywhere from five to twelve hours, during which

Giacomettis, in order to maximize their anxiety, attempt to imagine every step of the race they are "not-running." Some are said to be so successful in this enterprise that they suffer injuries comparable to those of conventional runners. Pumaddidas himself came out of last year's Boston Marathon, which he did not run for nine hours, with a case of "runner's knee" and a severe hypoglycemic condition. Injured or not, Giacomettis—or Giacs, as they call themselves—who hold their poses for five hours or more are said to "realize" the race, and they have their own medals with which non-competitors are honored.

If Giacs have extended Murphy's laws, the Neurologists, according to their spokesman, a Japanese neurochemist who studied with Baba Limbic and has for the past few years called himself "Medullah," have revealed their ultimate absurdity. For Medullah, the problem of speed is the problem of the brain, specifically the universal condition that he calls "Here-There-Aphasia." HTA, as it is known in the vernacular, is the devastating delusion that "here," a function of the right hemisphere, and "there," a function of the left, are different places. In effect, speed is an inevitable symptom of an asymmetrical brain, for once the hemispheres are divided, animals so afflicted will rush desperately from one place to another in search of unification.

Says Medullah (whose English, according to his disciples, is not so much "broken" as "neurologically symmetrical"): "Brain problem, not speed. Not running not enough. Not speed. Not happen not so quick." After years of work, Medullah devised a series of experiments in Limbic's laboratories that led to confirmation of his theory and, eventually, to "Neurologizing." Through selective breeding, he developed a species of rat that had a brain as asymmetrical as a human being's, with correspondingly large "de-sire-bundles" and "ambition-centers." When released on exercise wheels, such rats (called "Olympians" in papers published by Medullah) will run with maximum speed until exhausted. Retaining one group of Olympians for control studies, Medullah strapped another into specially designed harnesses that held them in suspension above the wheel so that, while their bodies remained motionless, their feet were always "racing." The idea of course was to "fool" the rats into thinking they were in motion. "Brain thinking moving," Medullah explains, "but brain mistaking. Thinking 'here!' thinking 'there!' but look! Always here!" Kept in harness throughout their lives, these rats, upon autopsy,

were found to have no "desire-bundles" whatsoever. What is more, their brains were so much "of a piece" that no demarcation could be found between the hemispheres.

Since the harness was impractical for human beings under normal racing conditions (Medullah has built several, which, used in conjunction with conveyor belts, are featured attractions at the Neurologists' training camp in the Catskills), Medullah devised a method of running that he believes will accomplish the same healing process in the human brain that the harness accomplished in the rats'. Neurologists bring deck chairs to the starting line and sit in them throughout the race. They are trained to keep their eyes closed and to move no part of their bodies except their feet, which, like harnessed rats, they tap softly on the ground as if they're running. According to Medullah, this subtle action has an *uncanny* effect on the brain, setting the motor regions at war against the reflective centers, exciting in the "here-region" a continuous sense of abandonment, in the "there-region" a sense of imminent arrival. Upon opening their eyes, Neurologists—having fooled their brains completely—are said to experience "brain-wholeness" to such an extent that they are transported with joy. And those who sit out enough races, according to Medullah, will gradually merge their hemispheres until, perceiving the ultimate truth that all points in space are one, they will relinquish the delusion of motion. "How go anywhere?" he says. "Anywhere everywhere!"

Of all Wilsonian dissidents, the most extreme are those who call themselves the "Neurowilsoners" or "not-Wilsoners." Organized by a young runner named "Emile Zatopek" (he includes the quotation marks in the spelling of his name to distinguish himself from the great Czech runner, to whom he is not related), Neurowilsoners reason that, while Murphy's original insight was correct, he did not understand it himself. As a former Wilsoner who became, in his time, a Giacometti and a Neurologist, "Zatopek" speaks from legitimate experience when he says, "All Wilsonism points in the same direction. Murphy's wisdom and Medullah's experiments reveal that the problem—the root problem!—is ambition. What neither understood was that the ultimate ambition of a damaged brain is to cure itself of brain damage. How can we make progress if we don't attack that problem at its source.<sup>97</sup>

Following "Zatopek," Neurowilsoners attempt to rid themselves of all desire by doing what they desire the least. As they understand it, there is no better way to

undermine ambition than running long distances as fast as possible. Since they regard this activity as pathological, they consider it an efficient process by which the brain is forced to accept its own hopeless predicament. "What we aim to do," says "Zatopek," who ran last year's Boston Marathon in two hours fourteen minutes flat, "is relinquish once and for all the belief that we can improve ourselves. Anyone who's ever seen a runner in peak condition will know that, whatever claims he makes to the contrary, this is his true goal. Let others war with brain damage! We embrace ours and deepen it in every way we can!"