
SEARS, EDWARD S. *Running through the Ages*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2001. Pp. vi+330. Illustrations, bibliography of major sources, index. \$55.00 cb.

Edward Sears decided to compile the "history, lore, and legend" (p. 1) of running out of frustration with other running books that covered only limited time periods. He wrote *Running through the Ages* to be a comprehensive resource for other runners, but he expresses the hope that historians, students, and coaches might find the book useful as well. His project is ambitious, to "[cover] the most important runners and races from prehuman times to the year 2000" (p. 1). He chose that approach because "prehumans . . . define us as runners" and "great runners of the past are both moving and motivating" (p. 1). Though he wishes to write a complete history, he admits that he limited himself to a review of the greatest runners of each era covered, as complete coverage would create a book of unmanageable size.

As a runner and a fan of track and field, I was charmed and entertained by Sears's book. I enjoyed reading about often told tales of legendary athletes such as Paavo Nurmi and Emil Zatopek, and I learned a few new tidbits of running lore. For example, I learned that running footmen in fifteenth- to eighteenth-century Britain carried a two-meters long pole with "a hollow silver ball [on the end] containing a hard boiled egg or a little white wine for nourishment" (p. 45), and that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European runners had their spleens removed or reduced to improve their running times. However, as a scholar I found *Running through the Ages* unsatisfactory.

Sears uses few primary sources for his synopsis of the history of Western foot racing and relies heavily upon secondary sources. His primary sources include letters, newspaper reports, books, and training guides from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His secondary sources are a hodgepodge of magazine articles from publications such as *The Runner* and *Athletics Weekly*, popular books such as the ghost written autobiography of Joan Benoit and the story of former Olympic gold medal winner Bob Hayes, and scholarly tracts from fields as diverse as human evolution, anthropology, and history. Sears cites his sources inconsistently—citing primary sources while neglecting to cite popular sources—and his bibliography includes references to "major sources" rather than to all sources consulted. Thus the reader is unable to identify or evaluate for herself the validity of Sears's many factual claims. This problem is especially vexing when Sears relies on magazine articles and/or books that straddle the border between scholarship and popular literature. For example, Sears uses John Cumming's, *Runners and Walkers: A Nineteenth Century Sports Chronicle* (1981), as one of the "major sources" for his section on the origin of modern running. Cumming, like Sears, cites his sources inconsistently. Therefore, though Sears calls Cumming's book, "the best reference to date covering running in the 19th century" (p. 319), the authority of Cumming's text is questionable.

Sears's lack of a thesis is a more troubling problem. The book as constructed is teleological in nature. Its first section argues that long-distance running is a successful evolutionary adaptation that allowed "prehuman" (p. 8) and prehistoric human beings to run

down swifter, but less enduring, game animals. In this section Sears refers to the hunting prowess of "primitive" people such as the Tarahumaras of Mexico, the Kanaka of the Philippines, and indigenous hunters in Africa. He then devotes most of the remaining 310 pages to Greco-Roman, European, and American forms of running that developed into the modern, Western sport of track and field. This segue from evolutionary prehistory to the history of Euro-American track suggests a "progress" from primitive to modern forms of running, insinuating that the development of track and field was evolutionary and inevitable since running is part of human nature and that Euro-American track and field is its most evolved and most important form. This teleology implies that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century running traditions of indigenous groups in the Americas, the Philippines, Africa, and Australia are more like "prehuman" and prehistoric behaviors than they are like modern Euro-American sports. I do not think Sears intended to derogate the traditions of indigenous groups, but I do believe his book would have been a better history of "running through the ages," if he had broadened his definition of running to include the cultural traditions of indigenous peoples.

Overall, I recommend *Running through the Ages* as an entertaining overview of Euro-American track and field for a general audience. Sears has compiled a lively collection of history and lore. However, I suggest scholars, teachers, and students should approach this work with a critical eye.

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