

John A. “Marathon” Kelley

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John Adelbert Kelley is a rare and enduring athlete. In April, 1990, this eighty-two year old distance runner finished his fifty-sixth Boston marathon in fifty-nine attempts. He won the laurel wreath of victory at Boston on two outings, held national road-racing championships and was a two-time Olympian for the United States. He has been the subject of newspaper articles and television interviews which have mainly chronicled his running “feats.” While such information is of interest, it offers one only a fleeting glimpse of the man himself. In a sporting world where careers end in the mid-thirties and little incentive is found in participation for its own sake, it is appropriate to ask, who is John A. Kelley and why does he continue to run? In attempting to accurately portray this athlete, the author interviewed him on two occasions. During the 1920s, the American public was well acquainted with the games that such heroes as Babe Ruth and Red Grange were playing. Their fascination with the art and science of marathoning was still a half-century away, but it was of little consequence to Kelley who was beginning to come into his own as a competitive runner. He won Boston in 1935 and 1945. In 1936, he competed in the Berlin Olympics and, in 1948, at age forty, he competed in the London Games. Although Mr. Kelley has ceased to be a front runner for more than three decades, he continues to tram and race with remarkable dynamism. Testing at the *Cooper Clinic and the Institute for Aerobics Research* in 1984 revealed superior cardiovascular health. Correspondence with the *World Association of Veteran Long-Distance Runners* and the *World Association of Veteran Athletes* indicates that he is among a handful of men his age worldwide who are active in the sport of marathoning. Professionals engaged in the psychodynamics of aging recognize that those who cultivate physical, artistic or intellectual capabilities can experience a feeling of command and self-direction. The use of Construct Theory and the Repertory Grid enabled the author to analyze Kelley’s attitude of self-direction. Quantitative analysis indicated a strong bond between his love for physical activity and a sense of emotional well-being. The sport of running has provided Mr. Kelley with a means of helping him to maintain a healthy state of psychological equilibrium in a society where overt signs of aging are routinely denied. In 1980, John A. Kelley was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame. He is the first road runner to receive this recognition. His athletic achievements span more than half a century and recognize a generous measure of success born from a gritty determination rather than raw talent. His accomplishments and perceived benefits of exercise continue to refute the notion that athletics are only for the young. Youth are compelled to respect his vitality, and the middle-aged to elderly prosper from yet another re-affirmation of the human spirit for life and a measure of its fullness.