

Running in Ancient Sumer

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Running, in its many forms, seems to have taken on significantly different roles throughout human history. The people of early Mesopotamia appear to have been quite familiar with running and it apparently played enough of a part in their culture to warrant written record. Significant literary evidence supports the existence of organized running in ancient Sumer of circa 2,000 B.C. Though many snippets of evidence exist, we are limited to only two expository sources upon which to rely for a clearer picture of this aspect of running in the distant past. The first details a great, and perhaps the earliest attested, endurance run. Samuel Noah Kramer in *History Begins at Sumer* has called the ancient royal sportsman who is credited with the feat “the first long-distance champion.” The second piece of evidence, or rather pieces of evidence, refer to what may best be described as city runs.

Some 4,000 years ago it was recorded upon a Sumerian cuneiform tablet that King Shulgi of Ur undertook a round-trip run of approximately 200 miles. Shulgi, aware of the political expediency of public appearances, and certainly ready to display his personal physical prowess, seems to have made it known that he would celebrate the lunar eshesh festival in two of his empire’s geographically distant cities within a 24-hour period.

The first leg of the run was southward to the city of Ur. His arrival, while it was still daylight, was followed by a night of eshesh feasting; the next morning Shulgi rose early and ran back to Nippur, the great cult city in the northern part of his domain, arriving before sunset and in time for more eshesh festivities. Thus, he had achieved, it is claimed his goal of celebrating the feast in both cities within a “day.”

Running was not, though, an isolated occurrence reserved for use only in the creation of appropriate royal physical image. A recent examination of the evidence indicates that “city races” took place in ancient Sumer. Two ancient texts from the city of Umma, dated around 2,035 B.C., point toward urban socio-religious running races that appear to have concluded with animal sacrifices in front of the town’s cult centers.

At this stage it is unclear who would have taken part in such race activity. However, with other evidence suggesting state-retained athletes, and, from as early as 2,400 B.C., the existence of an official Sumerian palace courier corps, there would have existed more than an adequate pool of readied participants.

This paper, using ancient literary sources, situates both Shulgi’s endurance feat and the city runs within the complex cultural context of ancient Sumer.



Ice Hockey Session Participants