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RUNNIN’ WITH THE DEVIL
By Justin Juul

Until his death in April 2011, professional van cleaner, Pierre Jean Martin, was famous for being London’s oldest employee. He had a long beard and crazy eyes and everyone in England knew him as “Buster,” the old drunk who wouldn’t ever die. But then he did.

Afterward, in a blog post on his company website, Buster’s boss, Charlie Mullins, wrote: “I can’t believe it, only yesterday afternoon he was in the canteen knocking back one of Buster’s beers, and now today he is gone.”

Buster drank and worked hard until the day he died. But that’s not what made him so amazing.

Four years ago, when Buster was 101-years-old, he became the oldest person in the world to run the London Marathon. He was never officially recognized by Guinness for his achievement because he grew up in an orphanage with no birth certificate, but that’s beside the point. Buster didn’t just run the marathon; he ran it while guzzling Newcastle Brown topped with orange slices, AKA “Buster Beer.”

“I don’t like water,” he said. “It’s always been a pint for me.” He also stopped every few miles for a smoke, which seems crazy, but was really just an attempt to stick to his daily routine no matter what. Buster started every morning with a cup of coffee and a cigarette and then kept the beer trickling through the rest of the day, often winding up at a local pub called The Crown and Scepter for a few nightcaps and some good conversation before wobbling home.

It was there at The Scepter where I finally met the man in August 2010. His story was so unlikely that I flew half way around the world to make sure it was real, to see if Buster really drank as much as he claimed and if he really was as active as his bosses at Pimlico Plumbers, who have experienced a huge climb in business since hiring Buster in 2005, had made him out to be.

He was. After smoking and drinking with Buster at The Crown and Scepter for nearly five hours, I can honestly say he was the living embodiment of modern science’s happy, healthy, athletic old drunk. And he knew it.

In the cab on the way home from The Scepter, I pressed Buster to reveal his secret.

“Drink more, live longer, mate.” Buster mumbled as he pulled himself out of his seat. He also told me to give him a call the next time I planned on running a marathon so he could come out and beat me. “You pay for the ticket, and I’ll come knock your bloody head off,” he wheezed.

My trip to meet Buster was a personal mission. I’ve been a runner for years. On a good week, I’ll put in fifty miles and on an average week I’ll run thirty. As it happens, I also
drink and smoke. A lot. But I don’t usually tell people that. At times I even hide it. That’s because runners are dudes who wake up at 5:00 am and eat egg-white omelettes for breakfast. Runners are girls who would rather go to the gym than a music festival. Runners work in finance or marketing, and they drive sports cars. They think a glass of wine and extra spaghetti at dinner is a reckless indulgence. Runners just seem so perfect. And that’s not me.

To be honest, the only reason I even started running was so I could drink excessively and not get fat. It was nothing heavy at first –just a jog around the block every couple days. But over the years running has grown into an obsession. These days I chart my miles on a calendar. I run before work during the week and I get up early on weekends to gallop through the park with all the other masochists. Afterward, if I can afford the time, I’ll head out for Bloody Marys and pitchers with friends. But it’s a guilty pleasure -- definitely not healthy—and I know if I want to keep running I’ll have to give it all up eventually. The alcohol, the cigarettes, the late nights. The fun. The truth of the matter is that if you want to live a long healthy life, you have to make sacrifices. You have to get pure.

Or do you? Turns out, Buster Martin might have been on to something. And his lifestyle isn’t as astonishing as it seems. In fact, a surprising number of successful athletes have been, shall we say, less than totally clean. And I’m not talking about performance enhancing stuff. Take Danny Harris, for example.

Harris won a silver medal in the 1984 Olympics for 400-meter American Hurdles and then again at The World Championships in 1987. Later that year he ended Edward Moses’ decade-long winning streak in an Olympic prep-race in Madrid. He was now famous, one of the fastest dudes the world had ever seen, and he was all set to win a gold medal when he got busted, not for diuretics or steroids, but for good old cocaine. As it turned out, Harris had been addicted to crack for much of his career and he kept on using through his suspension and after.

By 1991 he had become the top-ranked hurdler in America and second in the world. Then in February 1992, he failed another drug test and was banned from the sport for good. And while it’s true that Harris wound up on the streets, and now tours college campuses preaching about the horrors of drug addiction, my point is that he isn’t the only top-tier athlete with a hedonistic demon inside. The world of sports is full of this stuff --hardcore athletes doing amazing things while completely trashed on a regular basis. There’s Doc Ellis, the baseball player who pitched a no hitter on acid. There’s Michael Phelps with his bong, Daryl Strawberry with his coke, Olympic canoeing silver-medalist Nathan Baggaley with his MDMA, Allen Iverson on weed, and plenty of football players who drink like college sophomores.

What does that mean? Well, up until very recently the answer seemed obvious --Danny Harris and those other guys are freaks of nature and I’m just young and stupid. We’re wrong and the health nuts are right.
But weirdly enough, that might not be true. Just recently, a whole slew of scientific studies have begun turning conventional wisdom about health and fitness on its head. In one particularly startling result, researchers were stunned to discover that not only do moderate drinkers tend to outlive teetotalers, but heavy drinkers do too. Which raises the question: Could hedonism actually be good for you?

Before I started scaling back on my vices and becoming someone I can’t stand, I thought I’d look into the matter a bit.

**RATS IN A CAGE**

Turns out there’s a long history of runners getting shitfaced.

The Tarahumara, for example, are some of the fastest long-distance runners the world has ever seen. The subjects of Christopher McDougall’s bestselling book, *Born to Run*, this indigenous tribe of super athletes from the high deserts of Mexico have survived for thousands of years on a steady diet of rice, beans, rolling tobacco, and moonshine. Lots of it. “The average Tarahumara spends at least 100 days per year directly concerned with tesgüino [a sacred beer made from corn] and much of this time under its influence or aftereffects,” wrote anthropologist, John Kennedy, in his 1996 ethnography, *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre*.

Which is to say these guys are drunk, or at least tipsy, from sun-up to sun down. It’s worth noting that some of them are also quite old. I’m talking like 80-year-old men and women running ultra marathons through the desert in nothing but a pair of flip-flops. Sometimes they even go barefoot. Meanwhile, in America, it’s common knowledge that runners should buy new shoes every 500 miles. They should also strive for a protein rich diet, a smoke-free lifestyle, and moderate drinking at the very most. Of course, even if you do all that, you shouldn’t expect to be able to run when you get old.

So who’s right?

Probably not America. As it turns out, booze and sports might go hand in hand. In fact, alcohol seems more of a fuel for runners than a poison --like Gatorade with benefits.

Take, for example, the work of Dr. Michael French, professor of public health at the University of Miami. Going on the assumption that heavy drinkers exercise less than abstainers, French set out to analyze the extent to which that’s the case.

The resulting paper, “Do Alcohol Consumers Exercise More?” published in The American Journal of Health Promotion, probably wouldn’t have been printed if the answer hadn’t been such a shock. “Heavy drinkers certainly exercise more than abstainers,” said French. What was even more surprising was learning that heavy drinkers also exercise more than light drinkers. “There tends to be a linear relationship,” French said.
In other words, the more you drink, the more you exercise.

French’s study, a cross-sectional analysis of the drinking and exercise habits of adults in The United States, found that “drinking is associated with a 10.1 percentage point increase in the probability of exercising vigorously.” It also discovered that “heavy drinkers exercise about 10 more minutes per week than current moderate drinkers and about 20 more minutes per week than current abstainers.” Even stranger was the discovery that a night of extra-hard partying, rather than ruining your entire week, actually increases the likelihood that you’ll be more active in the days to come. “An extra episode of binge drinking increases the number of minutes of total and vigorous physical activity per week for both women and men,” the study found. Which might explain why I tend to drink more the night before a race and how guys like The Situation and Pauly D from Jersey Shore can drink around the clock and still stay ripped.

But it doesn’t necessarily mean you should start drinking like a juicehead gorilla if you want to start running more. “We can’t say that if you drink more you’ll definitely exercise more or vice versa. It just appears that there’s a strong association between the two, but we can’t conclude that it’s causal,” explained French.

Nobody seems to know why drinking and running work together, but it’s getting harder and harder to deny that’s the case.

Another experiment led by Dr. J. Leigh Leasure, head of the neuroscience research lab at The University Houston turned out even weirder results. During the study, a group of adult male rats was split in two. Half of them were given access to a running wheel while the other half just sat around in cages doing nothing. Then, after three weeks, the wheels were removed and both groups got a huge bottle of rat whiskey for their troubles.

Not all rats drink. “Most of them are not stupid like humans!” Leasure said. But these rats had been selectively bred to enjoy alcohol, so the researchers expected some craziness to go down. But they weren’t ready for what happened next.

Previous experiments by other researchers had shown that alcoholic rats drink less than normal if given the opportunity to run. But those experiments were different from Leasure’s in that the rats had access to booze and running at the same time. Still, what the doctor’s team expected to see in their experiment was that the rats who’d just finished three weeks of hardcore training would turn their little noses up at the thought of wild partying while the coach potato rats got plastered. Wrong.

What actually happened was that the running rats hit their feeder bottle hard for the first week while the sedentary rats babysat theirs. It was like forcing a bunch of librarians to celebrate Spring break in Cancun with the guys from Animal House. “The maximum intake [of a running rat] was about four to five g/kg per day. Five g/kg would be equivalent to about a fifth of whiskey,” Leasure said. That’s a lot.
Together, the studies suggest that I’m doing everything right. Well, almost. “I’ve never seen any studies showing the positive effects of smoking,” said French. “That’s different.” But at least now I can defend my drinking even if it does seem crazy to others. Because, according to Dr. Leasure, it totally isn’t.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised that something rewarding, like exercise, might make people want more of something else rewarding, like alcohol,” she said.

That rings true in my case. I don’t think I ever drank as recklessly as the day I ran my first marathon. And the cans of Tecate definitely disappear from my fridge faster on weeks when the weather’s nice and I know I’ll be taking on extra miles. I never really mean to drink more; it’s just so easy to rationalize when I’m sweating so much. And, like Dr. Leasure’s rats, my body just seems to crave it. But it’s a slippery slope and it can’t be healthy in the long-run. I mean, I can’t live like this forever, can I? Can alcohol and exercise be the key to long-term health?

Dr. French is hesitant to say yes, but he’s at least somewhat optimistic given the right set of circumstances. “We certainly wouldn’t advise people who have a predisposition to alcoholism, or a mental condition that doesn’t allow them to drink, to drink more. But for people without those conditions, certainly, as a relaxation aid, as a socializing mechanism, as well as an exercise mechanism, apparently alcohol can be beneficial,” he said.

In other words, drinking is good because it’s fun. It makes socializing easier, which in turn makes you appreciate life more. According to Dr. Rudolph Moos, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford, these could be some of the reasons why his study turned out the way it did, why, after 20 years of waiting in vain for old drunks to die, he had to admit they might be on to something.

The results of Moos’s study, a paper called Late Life Alcohol Consumption and 20-year Mortality, published in 2010 in the journal, Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, suggest that living an alcohol-free lifestyle actually increases your odds of dying early. The 20-year study, which followed 1,824 participants (men and women between ages 55 and 65) for 20 years, found that mortality rates were lowest for moderate drinkers. Real drunks, the David Hasselhoff’s and Snooki Piazzis of the group, had higher mortality rates, but the surprise was that out of everyone involved, abstainers died fastest. All that not-drinking turned out to be a bad idea; not only was it boring, but it might just have killed them in the end.

Moos thinks his results might have something to do with the lust for life drinkers seem to have. Drinkers are social beings. They go to bars and parties while their friends sit home watching the tube and waiting to die.

“People who are more sociable are likely to have a larger and more supportive social network, which has itself been associated with longevity,” said Moos.
His theories fall right in line with the findings of another recent study led by Jens Christoffer Skogen of the University of Bergen in Norway in which 38,390 people described their physical and mental health, along with their usual alcohol consumption over the span of two weeks. What Skogen’s team discovered was that “abstention was related to increased odds for both case-level anxiety and depression.” Furthermore, “individuals who label themselves as abstainers are at particularly increased risk.” The study found that while heavy drinkers were more likely to have problems with anxiety, abstainers were at the highest risk for depression. Drunks were nervous but happy people, while the straightedge curmudgeons were just plain sad.

Even more surprising was that the findings held true even when Skogen’s team excluded results from “sick-quitters,” heavy drinkers who now identify as abstainers because of previous problems with alcohol. In other words: the healthiest of abstainers, those who simply never drink for non-health-related reasons, were still more depressed than their chronically drunk and fun-loving peers --who they likely never saw at parties, concerts, or marathons. And that, Skogen believes, could be part of the reason abstainers get so down.

“In many societies, especially in Western societies, it’s kind of expected that you should be drinking, at least a little bit,” he said. Choosing not to drink, for whatever reason, just makes you seem weird. And nobody likes a weirdo.

In short, what these studies suggest is that drinking makes you happier, healthier, and more athletic. Heavy drinking can be dangerous, of course --it might rot your liver or get you thrown in jail for the night-- but it’s nothing compared to the soul sucking, depression-inducing horrors of teetotalism.

**CHOOSE YOUR POISON**

So, when it comes to running, why does it seem like I’m in the minority? Given these findings, you’d think they’d have giant beer gardens set up at the end of every marathon in the world to promote health. You’d think you see a little more overlap between bar culture and runners. I mean, my friends are all drinkers. Why don’t they run?

“The problem with running today, and one of the reasons I think more people don’t get into it, is that you can’t relate to any of the runners they put in magazines. They’re just too perfect.” I agreed, of course, but I was a little shocked to hear “Marathon Matt,” a running coach from San Francisco, say it. I was also surprised that he’d suggested we meet at a bar and frankly shocked at the speed with which he sucked down beers and the lack of irritation he showed when I smoked. I’d discovered Marathon Matt after searching long and hard for someone I considered to be the quintessential runner, a serious-looking dude in spandex short-shorts, a man who proudly and publicly identified as an athlete. I wanted a “real runner” to explain why running culture seems so stuffy. If
what all the doctors say is true, if running and drinking are naturally complimentary, then why don’t you see much evidence of it?

As I soon as I’d met the man, I knew I’d find out soon. He showed up to our meeting wearing wraparound Oakleys and holding a clipboard and a Blackberry –an off-duty runner’s uniform if ever there was one. With his cocksure smile and sore-leg strut, I could tell that Matt Forsman, AKA, Marathon Matt, was my dude –the living embodiment of running culture. Only he wasn’t. Not at all.

Marathon Matt couldn’t explain why runners don’t drink because Marathon Matt drinks almost everyday. He couldn’t explain why runners never smoke because many of his clients smoke. “Usually not cigarettes,” he said. “But still.” In fact, Marathon Matt seemed almost as uncomfortable with running as I do.

“I have this name, you know --Marathon Matt-- and so people think I must be a certain way,” he said. “They think I run everyday and only eat grain or whatever, but that definitely is not true.” Forsman draws a line between your average runner, like him or me, and the runners featured in magazines. There’s Dean Karnazes, the ultra marathoner famous for completing 50 marathons in 50 states over the course of 50 days. And then there’s Scott Jurek, the famous vegan ultra runner who runs hundred-mile races like nothing. The list goes on.

“Those ultra marathoners are just straight-up weird,” said Forsman. “And believe me, I know quite a few of them and they’re not as put-together as you’d expect.”

And they might not be as healthy as they seem either. As head physician for America’s 2012 Olympic team, Dr. Cindy Chang sees this type of obsessive behavior all the time. “Overtraining is a big topic and we are always on the look out for it,” said Chang. She also thinks there’s a great deal of overlap between junkies and over exercisers. “If you don't exercise you won't have physical withdrawal symptoms like those experienced with alcohol or certain drugs,” she said. But otherwise they’re very similar afflictions. “I think neither is healthy,” she added.

The idea here is that too much of anything is bad. Running all day everyday on a steady diet of celery and water might make you look really great (if you’re in to skeletons) and it might even make you famous. But it’s probably about as good for you as eating crystal meth for breakfast. Obsessive exercisers, obsessive eaters, alcoholics, junkies –they’re all just different manifestations of addictive personalities. Not normal, in other words. And as glamorous as Charlie Sheen-level drug use or Scott Jurek-like running can look, it’s rarely worth the social sacrifice.

Addiction specialist, Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University, agrees. In a recent paper, an analysis of the prevalence of addiction among U.S. adults co-authored by Nadra Lisha and Steve Sussman, called Prevalence of the Addictions: A Problem of the Majority or the Minority? he states that “exercise can become a craving for some people when engaged in excessively (e.g., going jogging for extreme distances and periods of time).
As a consequence, many occupational, educational, or social activities are neglected, depression occurs when the individual does not exercise, and excessive exercise may lead to repeated injuries.”

If you’ve ever seen an episode of “Intervention,” this stuff should sound familiar. In fact, the only difference between drug addicts and running addicts seems to be our perception of them. One set seems healthy, while the other seems hopeless. The truth is that they’re both very extreme situations.

"Running addiction is similar to any other addiction. At first it feels great, but if it gets out of hand, it can negatively affect your life,” said Dr. Griffiths.

Forsman agreed with me that anyone and everyone can be a runner and that what might be holding many people back is the idea that you have to change your whole lifestyle, that you have to start eating and acting like a suicidal super athlete, before you even jog your first half-mile. He also thinks the world hasn’t had a good running hero since Steve Prefontaine died in the early eighties. “Everyone loved that guy because they could relate to him,” Forsman said.

Just like I could relate to Buster Martin, the 105-year-old beer-swilling marathoner in London. To honor his passing, I decided to do something to make the old man proud. I practiced drinking for a few weeks and then signed up for the US Half-Marathon in San Francisco. I couldn’t follow Buster’s training program to the letter, but I did my best. I drank up to midnight the day before and then had myself a smoke when I got up.

I crossed the finish line at 9:00am this morning and headed directly to a bar called Zeitgeist to wait for my friends. By the time they got there at noon, I was three pints deep, smoking like a chimney, and feeling great. Buster, this one’s for you.