

The Longest Race: A Lifelong Runner, and Iconic Ultramarathon, and the Case for Human Endurance

Ed Ayres

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Lifelong runner Ed Ayres uses the John F. Kennedy fifty-mile ultramarathon as a backdrop for his new book, *The Longest Race: A Lifelong Runner, an Iconic Ultramarathon, and the Case for Human Endurance*. Throughout it we run alongside the sixty-year-old Ayres as he takes on America's oldest and largest ultramarathon. The author vividly recounts what he sees and experiences as he makes his way along the Appalachian Trail, but his book is as much a critique of modern society as it is a story about running. Ayres uses the subject of endurance to make a startling correlation between the concerns faced by long-distance runners and the concerns we face as a society at large.

For endurance runners, the most important concern is starting strong and setting the right pace. According to Ayres, the founding editor and publisher of *Running Times* magazine and former editorial director of The Worldwatch Institute, this is where we are failing as a modern society. Ayres writes, "sometimes large events go unrecognized, if only because our vision is so focused on what's immediately around us." According to Ayres, as Americans continue the race to invent, bring to market, and build wealth, we ignore the specter of catastrophic climate change, ecological failure, resource wars, peak oil, and Malthusian outcomes.

The biggest mistake, he states, would be thinking of human history as a long tale of progress. As we have slowly separated ourselves from the natural world, we have forgotten how dependent we are on the thousands of other life forms around us. Just as a runner needs to listen to his or her body, Ayres urges us to listen to what the earth is telling us, and get back in touch with our evolutionary roots.

Our "speed-enamored culture has conspicuously disconnected us from our nature," he continues. It is the industrialized world, he maintains, with its ever-expanding technological powers, that has both systematically weakened our capabilities as individuals and contributed to "the widening disparity between fit and unfit Americans." In essence, Ayres is comparing modern society to a sprinter, who can run for only one or two minutes before stopping and gasping for breath. If we want our civilization to last, we need to adopt the method of an endurance runner, who can go for hours.

The Longest Race isn't just for readers interested in sports and recreation. It is highly political and provides important information that may change the way we live our lives. Ayres has very strong views and opinions, and some of the information he brings to light is quite unsettling. But this is what makes the book so enjoyable. Ayres is able to effectively deliver his message in each chapter by using his fifty-five years of running experience to make fascinating connections between human endurance and the sustainability of our society. Getting the latter on the right track isn't going to be easy, but neither is running a fifty-mile ultramarathon. Just as a sixty-year-old Ed Ayres found the will to finish the race, he believes that we must find the will to survive.

ANDREW KIPP (Winter 2013)

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