

Dear Lowell,

The other day I was thinking about running races. They seem to be an obvious form of competition, starting from a young age. Do they date back to the beginning of human history when they may have started as a more primal competition for food or mates, or do they simply exist to indulge a human desire for competition? On Thanksgiving morning, I ran a four-mile race in Portland. The weather that morning was cold and cloudy, which hurt my lungs when I had to breathe in. I wasn't even forced to compete since it wasn't for the cross country team, so I had no obligation to register and show up to run. By this logic I should have hated the race and not shown up in the first place, but I enjoyed running it with my friends. I realized afterwards, when the results came out, that I had also been subconsciously competing against the others in my age group. Does running in races like this serve a purpose other than being healthy or getting in shape? I either enjoyed that race because I like the act of running, or because I, as a human, enjoy companionship and friendly competition, and I know I dislike the act of running. I believe, then, that this enjoyment of races must come from some other part of human evolution as well. If races were organized solely for the purpose of running in the cold weather, nobody would participate because it's not enjoyable to run in cold weather. Why would humans participate in something they don't enjoy unless it gave them some sort of psychological satisfaction, or filled a subconscious need to compete with others?

I also wonder if running helps people think better. I've heard the theory that physical activity makes brains work well, but I've seen little evidence to prove it. I don't think I thought any more clearly while I was running that race; in fact I was probably just thinking about how much I hated running. If I had instead been trying to solve a math problem while running, would I have solved it faster than I would have without running? When running on my own in the woods, I think my mind is clearer, but I don't know if this would translate to other settings such as better thinking in school. Since it does seem that being in nature is a good way to think, can one say the same about running and physical activity or does it depend on the location? If schools combined physical activity in lessons, it could potentially increase productivity but there's also the risk of distracting from the lesson. Especially in younger children, who often have trouble sitting still, physical activity could help in school, but I don't know if this would have any effect on their ability to absorb information or if it would be even more distracting. I also don't think this would be very practical in a school setting. Goodbye.