

You are what you run

By Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw

“What do you do?” or “what are you?” are simple questions but often seem indiscreet, or even rude. But I am interested to hear the first thing that a person says. I say that I’m a lecturer in French Literature at the University of the West Indies. “That’s nice” is the usual response, followed by a polite smile and a quick end to the conversation. French Literature does not attract a mass following.

But if you say “I’m a runner” (even an ordinary runner) it would be sure to generate a discussion. For a long time I didn’t think I had earned that right. I came to the sport late in life although I did have the occasional jog along the Charles River and through the back roads of Brookline as a student in Boston. But I thought that to call yourself a runner you had to conquer some major race. The title had to be earned, I felt, just like a degree. The 5K races I ran in were a start, and I did quite a few of those until I began to run with “real runners” in half-marathons and marathons.

The UWI Half-Marathon was one of the races that earned me the right to be called a runner. It is a special race for me because I teach at the institution, I know members of the committee who organize the race and I know how much effort has gone into this three-year-old event. From the moment it was announced that the University, for the first time in its history, would be hosting a half marathon I knew I had to take part.

The first race, in November 2004, started at 07.00. The sun was already up and those of us running the race were hot from beginning to end, almost boiling over by the time we completed the course. The slow times testified to the temperature, but even though we suffered in the hot sun we could still appreciate how well the race was organized and how much attention was paid to ensure that we were given a traffic-free route.

That may seem strange to those who run marathons in other countries but here in Trinidad and Tobago runners must often negotiate both the competition and the cars. Being on the run and assured of your safety from oncoming vehicles is not something we take for granted. While enjoying the fruits and the banquet of local specialities provided for us at the finish some of us suggested that that the race should in fact start

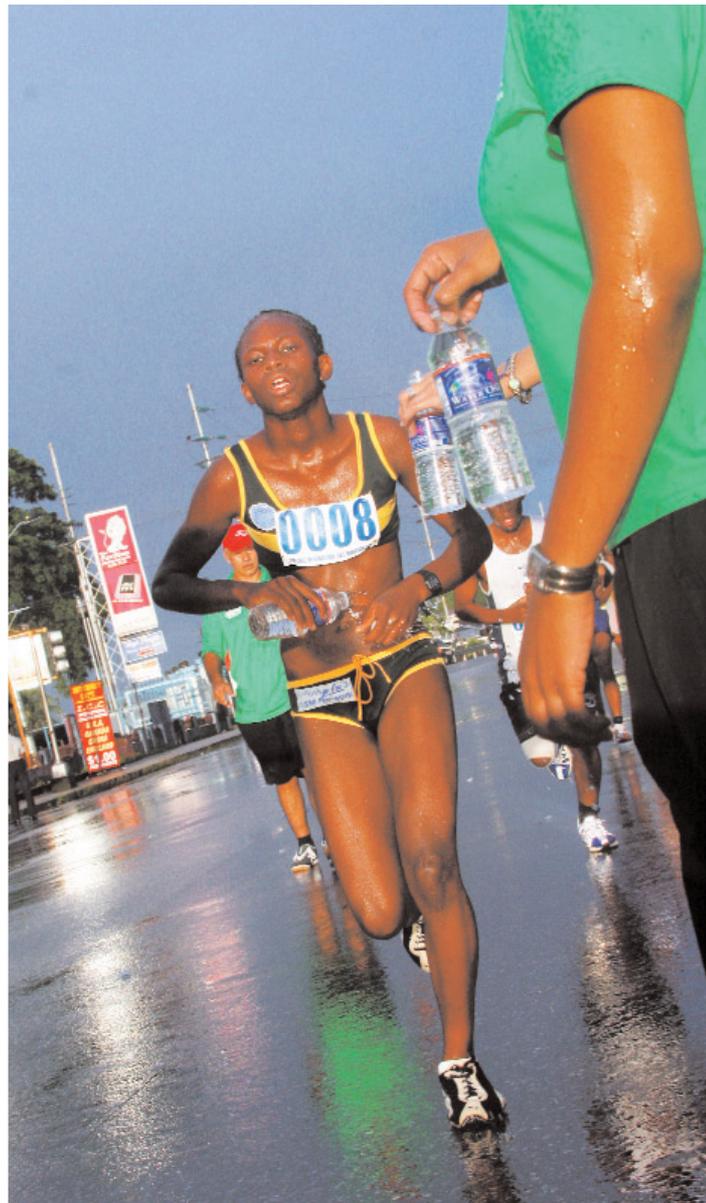
earlier. The organisers listened, and the next year we set off at 06.00.

I was there, ready to take part again. The earlier start meant that we needed to get to SPEC, the newly built University sports centre, at 05.00. There is always a great feeling before the start of a race, particularly when it is still dark. Around race time the sun rises at 05.45 and I enjoy the short-lived freedom the cover of darkness brings before all is revealed at the starting line.

Trinidad and Tobago is not a big place and the more you run the more you begin to recognize the faces of other runners. The more you race the more you begin to remember the times of the top runners. You begin to recognize the ones you will not see again until the finish line and those you hope to stay with or even outrun. The anonymity that one may feel in other countries is not part of our island running experience. Because the running community is small our differences are always wonderfully apparent: age, class, race ethnic group, religious affiliation, political affiliation, nationality - we are all there on the line. We are all ready to test ourselves and be tested by the course, the conditions and our fellow competitors.

This year the half marathon course tested nearly 600 of us. This is big for a race in Trinidad and Tobago, on par with our long-established local marathon. The UWI half-marathon has reached out and now attracts international runners, like the 2005 winners John Muriethi Muriuki from Kenya and the Russian Firaya Sultanova-Zhdanova. Top regional runners like Pamenos Ballantyne and Curtis Cox also participate; and students are beginning to come in from other university campuses in the West Indies. But the most runners come from Trinidad and Tobago.

I recognize many of the faces that I see doing laps around the Queen’s Park Savannah on a Saturday or Sunday morning. These runners start to talk to you simply because they have seen you run in the rain, before sunrise, or after a hard day at work. Names are not important and the question “what do you do?” seldom comes up because what we all do is run. A friendly teasing takes place as we stretch, drink a cold Gatorade or cold coconut water cut there and then by a coconut vendor. Some of my best Saturday mornings have started this way with a long run; some banter and a quiet sense of community that comes from





running with friends and people I would never have met if I was not a runner. We make this connection simply through running.

This island is our home, and our running course. Trinidad and Tobago in trying to keep up with the more advanced countries, sometimes goes too fast and pays the consequences for a poor start. As a nation we are in that race to progress but unless you run at your own pace you are apt to fall back and weaken in the end. There is no possibility of a negative spilt; no

possibility of reclaiming what you put out in the beginning. The island itself is beautiful but the traffic jams, the billboards, and the new high-rise buildings are constant reminders of our race to progress.

I never thought I'd be able to progress to race 21km. There is an immense feeling of satisfaction that comes from setting and reaching goals, from making progress by building on what you did before. One of my running buddies says that running a race is a humbling experience. Humility, perhaps even

more than pride, enables us to progress. Progress can be measured through small, simple acts of respect - like earlier starting times,

or traffic free zones, and showing ordinary runners like me that some reflection before the race starts is no bad thing.

MEN:

1	Ernest KIMELI	USA	1:05:07
2	Zepherinus JOSEPH	STL	1:07:45
3	Pamenos BALLANTYNE	STV	1:07:47
4	Richard JONES	TRI	1:09:44
5	Ronnie HOLASSIE	TRI	1:10:07
6	Curtis COX	TRI	1:11:45
7	Errol WILLIAMS	TRI	1:12:29
8	Elvis TURNER	TRI	1:16:01
9	Brian MAYNARD	TRI	1:16:45
10	Clarence TOBIAS	TRI	1:16:54

WOMEN:

1	Jemima SUMGONG	USA	1:12:08
2	Firaya SULTANOVA	UKR	1:20:21
3	Shermin LASALDO	TRI	1:30:35
4	Tonya NERO	TRI	1:32:56
5	Ruth METIVIER	TRI	1:33:35
6	Solange GRIFFITH	TRI	1:35:49
7	Alika MORGAN	TRI	1:36:34
8	Kerticha JOHN	TRI	1:38:26
9	Leisl PUCKERIN	TRI	1:40:38
10	Paulette LUCESS	TRI	1:40:55

RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 74