

Men at war

Opinion

What happens when the battle of the sexes takes to the streets? Gillian Castka relates her experiences.

When we run in track competitions men are separated from the women. However, when we run on the road more often than not men and women run together. Like it or not, men are from Mars and display different characteristics to women runners. If you are going to get along and enjoy your running there has to be a certain degree of acceptance and tolerance of these differences. A lot of them stem from the philosophy of "why do we run?"

Men tend to have a more basic competitive testosterone-powered need to compete, whereas most of the women I know run for far more holistic reasons.

Women often run so that they can have that extra glass of wine or bar of chocolate, or fit into the same pair of jeans that they wore ten years ago.

Running with men is often good fun, though. We love it when they settle down alongside you in a race and help you through the tough times, frequently jeopardising their own race plans in the process. They volunteer to swoop into aid stations and return with a drink or a sponge for you. Frequently the "gentleman of the highway" is in the veteran category and you fail to find him in the finish zone to say thank you.

But then there is also the taxi driver mentality – men who can't handle being passed by a female runner, and who run with bursts of speed, frequently noisily and with flailing arms, while spraying body fluids. These guys often take delight in following too closely and clipping your heels. They then cut abruptly in front of you as soon as they consider that the overtaking manoeuvre has been completed, which generally it has not.

Men who run like women should be barred from mixed races. No, it's not the pink racing shoes – it's the sounds, or rather the lack of them. They are light on their feet, short with their stride, shallow breathing and make you think you have got a rival female runner sitting on your tail.

Men with pony tails: you spend twenty minutes closing the gap, inch by inch, on a pony-tailed runner, only to find that you have been chasing a man. Worse are the men who knowingly enter races wearing a woman's number and really mess up the results system.

We love male runners who, due to their biomechanics and superior strength, have a lovely relaxed even-paced run which helps you to maintain your own pace. Following a man with small, firm buttocks in small size shorts can be as tantalizing as watching a metronome. They can be even more appealing when they have to get out of their sweaty shorts at the end of a race, and haven't

spotted you standing behind them.

As well as bare buttocks men are also at leisure to run bare-chested during the hot summer months. Sports manufacturers are now making ladies' sports tops that double up as supporting bras, so that you only need one layer. These cropped tops are also getting quite skimpy too, without compromising modesty.

Spare a thought for the men who have to endure such boring colours in their running kit, particularly their shoes. If all your training shoes were in blues and blacks you might be forgiven for having a pragmatic approach to your running, rather than the hop and a spring that pink training shoes inspire.

I'm not sure what we should do with men who finish ahead of most women and then claim small size race t-shirts with the altruistic motive of giving them to wife or girlfriend or small child, but which results in there being no small size t-shirts when you go to claim yours.

Probably our pet hate are those, and around 95 percent of them are male, who start in the front ranks of a race for their moment of glory and then make you dodge and weave around them when they run out of steam – usually within one minute of the gun going off. In the same league are the guys who suddenly come to an abrupt halt in races without first easing to the side of the road.

Race days can bring out the best and the worst in both sexes. The gentleman racer will share their spare pins when you have forgotten yours and offer to return your race chip for you. Problems inevitably arise when race organisers attempt to allocate a certain number of toilets or changing facilities to the ladies, only to find them taken over by the men because the queues are shorter or because the men perceive under-utilisation. Some women are understandably not happy having to share their facilities with men, and such arrangements will continue to put off women who run regularly but who refuse to race for this very reason.

The biggest fools are the men who won't let you join their training sessions because they think that you are too slow or won't fit in. It's our differences that make us special and which result in a lifetime of learning. It would be a boring old world if we were all the same: vive la difference!

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