

Anything You Can Do...

BY JOANN DAHLKOETTER, PH.D.

Do men and women have equal playing fields? Women are attaining equality in the professional world, in universities and at home. What about in the athletic arena? Are women runners any different physically and psychologically from the men who run?

The answer appears to be a definite yes — and no. Basic differences prevail, both mentally and physically, and these factors do affect performance. Men generally log faster times in races than women, and they have greater body size, strength and stamina. However, women runners can train and compete like men. The difference in marathon times between men and women has narrowed substantially over the past 25 years.

So, can women catch up to men?

Physiological Differences

Jack Daniels, Ph.D., a prominent exercise physiologist, conducted a test of 30 elite women distance runners. He compared men and women in terms of body composition, maximal oxygen ca-

How Women Runners Differ from Men Runners

capacity (VO₂ max) and running efficiency. In measuring basic physiological traits, he found that men, as a rule, are taller, have a longer stride length and weigh more. But the primary reason for their faster performances is hormones — the influence behind speed and strength.

Men produce more testosterone, the hormone that boosts the concentration of red blood cells and promotes production of hemoglobin, the protein that carries oxygen within red blood cells. Estrogen, the hormone that prevails in women, does not have the same effect. Daniels noted that each liter of a man's blood contains 20 grams more hemoglobin and 11% more oxygen than the average for women.

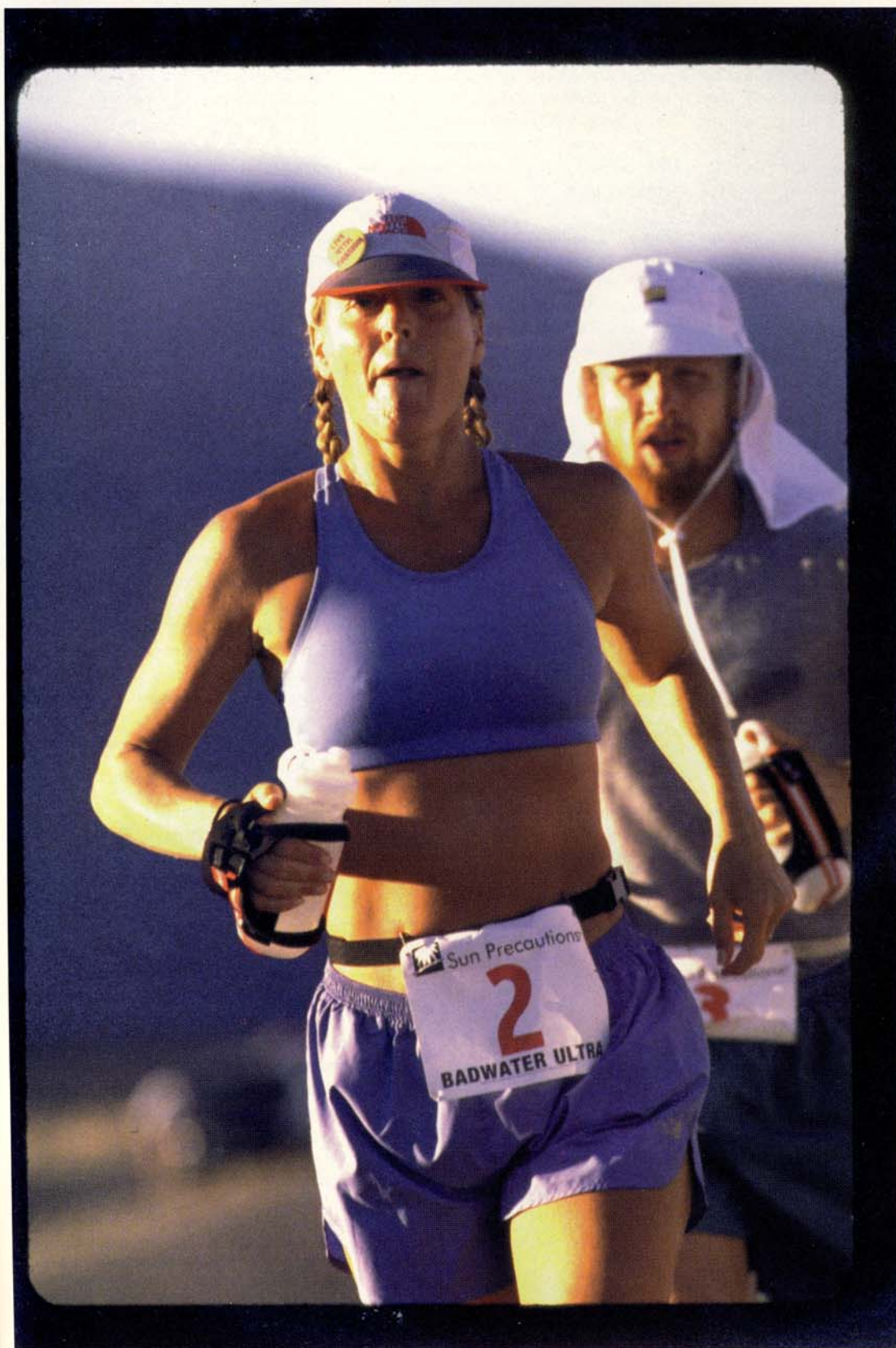
Even though a man's running capability is generally better than a woman's, there is an enormous area of overlap. While the best male runner is faster than the best female, very few men are faster than the best women runners. Ann

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY DI ZINNO

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FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, A MAN AND A WOMAN COMPLETED THE SUN PRECAUTIONS' BADWATER ULTRAMARATHON TOGETHER. LISA SMITH AND JAY BATCHEN TRAIN TOGETHER DAILY, AND HAVE DEVELOPED SIMILAR FACE AND STYLE SINCE THEIR WEDDING LAST YEAR.

Trason has demonstrated this many times with her second and third place overall finishes in the Western States 100-mile race. Thus, there must be other factors that come into play.

When Daniels measured VO2 max, which is the greatest volume of oxygen that can be sent out to your muscles during exercise, he found that women runners have an average VO2 max that is 10-12% below that of men. However, there are some remarkable exceptions. Joan Benoit Samuelson's VO2 max was tested at 78 — better than most elite men runners. Samuelson's VO2 max was equal to former marathon world-record-holder Alberto Salazar's.

What about the important question of fat? Men generally have proportionately more muscle and women have more fat, which is part of the structure nature provides women for childbearing. Male runners usually have 8-20% body fat; for the average woman runner, 13-25% is the normal range. For runners of comparable ability, a woman will generally have twice the percentage of body fat of her male counterpart. This extra fat increases the energy cost of any type of physical exercise, especially running, since this is a weight-bearing sport.

However, women can change their body composition quite dramatically. As weight decreases, oxygen uptake improves, but there is a point of diminishing returns. Beyond a certain level, the cost of getting thinner becomes detrimental to health, and running performance declines. Women who achieve extremely low body fat percentages often be-

come amenorrheic and lose their menstrual periods. The low estrogen levels associated with this condition frequently lead to long-term injuries, notably stress fractures.

This is where the psychological distinctions between men and women become an important issue.

Psychological Differences

In my 20 years of clinical practice and research with athletes, I have found that the motivation for running is different between the two sexes. Men usually begin running to get into shape and to feel better internally. Women often begin running in order to lose weight or to look more attractive to others.

Indeed, body image, weight management and eating habits are central issues in the lives of women. Runners are no exception to this rule. Virtually every woman's magazine has a diet column. Diet clinics and medications are prevalent in the media and on the internet. This preoccupation with food, fat and looking good has become a predominant concern for many women athletes — a fact that is confirmed by the growing number of women runners with poor self-image and/or eating disorders.

Where does this obsession with body image come from? For men in our society, power, status and money are greatly emphasized; for women, it's appearance. Men gaze at women runners. Women watch themselves being looked at. The way a woman is viewed by others most often determines the relationship she has with herself. The next time you go to a running event, spend a few

minutes afterward observing how much "checking out" is going on, and how many conversations revolve around women, body image and thinness.

Thinking Differently About the Reasons for Running

How can women runners find greater satisfaction and a sense of well-being in the bodies that they have? How can they put an end to obsessing about fat, food and appearance? Clearly, women need to address the issue of self-image. In my practice, I advise my female athlete clients to start emphasizing intrinsic qualities rather than on external appearance. They need to be less concerned about the opinions of others and focus on internal acceptance of themselves, regardless of body size or shape. The greater your inner strength and self-esteem, the less need you have for someone else's approval.

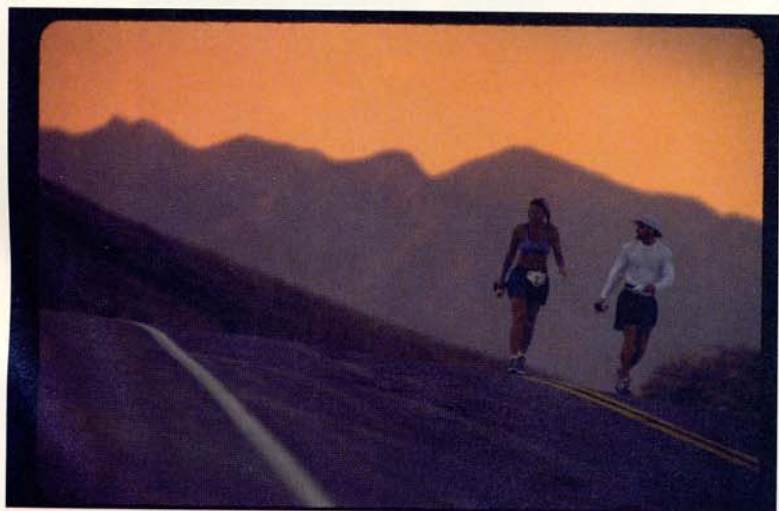
Tools for Awareness and Change

- Learn to trust your body and its messages.
- Make only those personal changes you can live with in the long run.
- Run according to your body's needs, not only your training plan.
- View food as nourishment, not just as pleasure.
- Learn to fully appreciate and celebrate the body that you have.

Making Your Body a Partner in Your Quest for Ultimate Health

The challenge for women runners is to move away from obsessing about body image and weight loss and to focus more on improving health and quality of life. The key is body-competence: learning to fully accept the body you are given. Once you have a better relationship with yourself, you will be more motivated to take good care of your body. You can be more in tune with its needs and discover a variety of ways to challenge, nourish and support your body. Then you can free your energy for engaging in the more exciting activities of life. You can work out for the right reasons, enjoy running to the fullest, and do it completely for yourself. ▲

JoAnn Dahlkoetter, Ph.D., author of YOUR PERFORMING EDGE, is an internationally recognized sports psychologist, past winner of the San Francisco Marathon and second in the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon. To see her new book, visit www.YourPerformingEdge.com or call 650-654-5500. For a free newsletter with valuable training tips and articles, e-mail: joann@YourPerformingEdge.com.



IT TOOK SMITH AND BATCHEN 43 HOURS, 23 MINUTES AND 56 SECONDS TO COMPLETE BADWATER, AND DURING THAT ENTIRE TIME THEY WERE NEVER MORE THAN FIVE FEET APART.