We Were Cross-Country Runners Once, and Young

My friend Jay and I recently attended the 2023 National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I cross-country championships, which were hosted by the University of Virginia and held on November 18 at Panorama Farms outside of Charlottesville, where I now live.

Jay and I are longtime runners. We've known each other for more than fifty years, since high school, when we ran cross country and track together. We went to different colleges but ran on our respective college teams, and we've continued to run and occasionally compete against each other since then, albeit in recent years with steadily increasing decrepitude. Jay refers to our current mode of running as "shuffle jogging." But running remains a strong bond between us, and our shared experiences in the sport have been a constant in our adult lives. Whether that constant has been a source of pleasure or an irritant seems to have varied over time, depending on, among other things, the results of our most recent races.

In high school and college Jay was a good middle-distance runner, recording a personal best of 1:52 in the half-mile. And in 1977, while in his second year of medical school, he finished the Marine Corps Marathon—the first marathon he ever attempted—in 2:38:53. (I still

have the letter he sent me shortly after the race. After reciting his time and place, he concluded succinctly, “No shit.”) I’ve never forgiven him for those times. But, I maintain, one cannot measure a runner, or a person, only by his fastest times. I think it’s relevant to this discussion that although Jay was a good middle-distance runner—yes, probably better than someone else I could name—and is one of the smartest people I’ve ever known, he has also become, as we’ve grown older, one of the most curmudgeonly. A few years ago, during a particularly animated conversation about something or other, I told him that he had become irascible and peremptory, and I stand by that characterization. He purported to be offended by my remark and has often reminded me of it during subsequent animated conversations, but I refuse to take it back. So there. Call us grumpy old runners.

In any event, Jay is now retired and lives in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, so attending the recent NCAA cross-country championships in Charlottesville offered us an easy opportunity to visit and catch up, share yet another experience related to running, and observe how the sport of collegiate cross country has changed over the past fifty years.

* * *

Cross country is the most bucolic of running sports. It emerged as a competitive activity in Great Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century—part of English society’s reaction to the Industrial Revolution—and often conjures images of the English countryside. As its name implies, it is simply an open-air running race that traverses some sort of country. But no rules govern the location or design of a cross-country course. Most courses in the United States are laid out in urban or suburban parks or on public or university golf courses. Some courses even

follow city streets, although—thank goodness—that brutalist 1970s version of the sport is increasingly uncommon. Because of differing terrain, variability in surface and footing, and differing weather conditions, it is impossible to compare times and performances across cross-country races. On the continuum of modern running sports, cross country therefore occupies a spot between more predictable middle- and long-distance track events whose results are at least roughly comparable (e.g., "the mile" or a five-kilometer track race) and newer versions of the sport like trail and mountain running, which introduce all sorts of other variables into the competitive equation. Cross country's traditionally pastoral setting and relative unpredictability have always attracted a certain kind of runner—one who embraces wildness, within civilized limits, and disdains regimentation.

Several other aspects of the sport deserve mention. First, after the starting gun is fired, a cross-country race is run continuously, with no scheduled periods or breaks and no timeouts. Regardless of what happens after the starting gun is fired, the race is over in the time it takes the runners to complete the course. Second, no matter how fit a runner is, the second half of a race is, or should be, excruciatingly painful; if it's not, then the runner has not run the race properly. Finally, as Jay (who, I must admit, often has surprising insights) observed, cross country may be the only sport in which a championship is decided in a single event in which every individual and every team simultaneously competes against every other—an old-fashioned battle royal.

Despite its appeal to certain runners, cross country remains the neglected stepchild of running, and of collegiate sport. One obvious reason is its inherent lack of watchability. These days collegiate cross-country courses vary in length between five and ten kilometers, depending on whether women or men are running and the point in the season in which the race occurs. Even if a course occasionally loops back by the start or finish line, the runners are often out of sight

of—or only distantly visible from—those areas, where most spectators naturally congregate. Watching a cross-country race is a test of visual acuity and an exercise in patient (or impatient) waiting. Be that as it may, the mystery of what happens when the runners are out of sight is one of cross country's enduring appeals. A lead pack of five or six runners disappears into a distant wooded copse, and when they reappear two or three minutes later, one has suddenly (and seemingly magically) acquired a five- or ten-second lead over the others. Only the runners themselves know, or will ever know, what happened in that wooded copse.

* * *

Panorama Farms, the site of the 2023 national championships, is a privately owned, working farm in the Virginia Piedmont, 850 acres in extent, that hosts various university and community events, including the University of Virginia's home cross-country meets. Because the farm has limited facilities and the only access to it is via a narrow county road with numerous private driveways, attendance at the NCAA championships was limited to five thousand people, and attendees were required to ride shuttle buses—a combination of local school buses and chartered buses—to the site from the parking lot of a nearby zombie shopping mall. Advance purchase of a $20 ticket was also required, although that requirement did not seem to be enforced.

As Jay and I waited in line to board our designated school bus—one of the first wave of buses that morning—we studied our fellow cross-country fans. Certain demographic characteristics were immediately evident. Although men and women were about equally represented, the crowd was overwhelmingly white and, even factoring in a substantial number of

high-school-aged kids, middle-aged. Most of the adult attendees were trim and fit looking and were obviously current or former runners, and the cars in the parking lot indicated that they were doing reasonably well in life. Most were dressed in jeans, running shoes, and sweatshirts or jackets with the names of universities, running clubs, running-shoe companies, or other, more obscure running-related products emblazoned on them. And all seemed cheerful and talkative, excited by the prospect of the upcoming race.

On the bus Jay chatted with the man seated next to him who seemed typical of the crowd: a man in his 60s with neatly trimmed gray hair and a fair, sun-spotted complexion, a former runner who had driven to Charlottesville from nearby Harrisonburg, Virginia, to watch the race and rendezvous with his former college coach, now in his 80s, who was serving as a volunteer official at the race. Jay is not prone to boasting, but, like most good runners (current or former), he is proud of his best races and times and remembers them, even decades later, with neurotic exactitude. Like most runners (current or former), he also can't help comparing his best races and times with those of other runners. On the bus I overheard him gently probing his seat-mate for information about the man's best times.

Although I had attended a high school cross-country meet at Panorama Farms earlier in the fall, the farm was even lovelier than I remembered. It consists of rolling pastures that envelop stands of oaks, beeches, maples, and other eastern hardwoods, with the Blue Ridge Mountains, fifteen miles west, forming a hazy backdrop to the whole scene. November had been unusually dry and warm in the Virginia Piedmont, but the night before the race a fast-moving cool front had passed through the area, bringing with it a light rain that dampened the ground and freshened the air. By morning the sky had cleared and was a pale eggshell blue—the color of the winter sky—and the temperature was in the high fifties, with a light, cool northerly breeze. Although the

grass on the course was still green, bales of tawny hay were scattered around the pastures, and the hardwood trees were bare but for the leathery brown leaves on the oaks and a few bright yellow leaves on the beeches. It was a quintessential fall day in the piedmont, and it was stunningly beautiful.

* * *

For scoring purposes, a cross-country team consists of at least five, and no more than seven, runners. Regardless of the size of a race, determining the winning team is a relatively straightforward affair, albeit the scoring is slightly counterintuitive. The top five runners on a team score points for their team equal to their finishing places, and the sum of their finishing places equals the team's score. That means that the team with the lowest score wins, and the score of a team that sweeps a meet—the best possible score—is 15 (= 1+2+3+4+5). But in a close race a team's sixth and seventh runners may finish ahead of one or more of a competing team's top five runners, thereby increasing the competing team's final score. In a close race a team's sixth and seventh runners may therefore decide the contest. In the unlikely event that two teams tie—as, remarkably, the Oklahoma State University and Northern Arizona University men's teams did in the 2022 national championship race—officials may employ several different methods to break the tie. The method currently employed by the NCAA compares the order of finish of each team's top five runners, awarding the win to the team with more winning comparisons. In 2022 NAU won the tiebreaker over OSU by a score of 3-2.

In the days of yore we tended to run, during the regular season, a series of "dual meets" or "tri meets," i.e., races between or among only two or three teams, sometimes running two

races in a single week (on, for example, Tuesday afternoon and Saturday morning). Toward the end of the season, usually in late October or early November, we then ran larger conference meets, followed by larger-still regional meets and state or national championships. These days, during the regular season, most teams run only a few large meets involving dozens of teams. I'm not sure why things have changed, but the era of small, almost informal races is long gone.

In the days of yore timing was also relatively primitive, and the imperial system of measurement reigned supreme. A coach with a stopwatch occasionally read aloud runners' split times or places at various locations along the course—usually at convenient mile markers—and an official at the finish line read aloud final times as runners crossed and accepted wooden tongue depressors with their finish places handwritten on them. These days runners wear bib numbers with microchips embedded in them, and the chips transmit each runner's time and place, on a kilometer-by-kilometer basis, to a computer, which displays them in real time on a large electronic scoreboard. The metric system has finally supplanted the imperial system in American running (except for an occasional mile or two-mile race on the track), and, as in many other areas of our lives, "big data" has invaded the once-bucolic world of cross country.

Although training methods have not fundamentally changed over the past fifty years, they too have evolved and grown more sophisticated. To prepare for competition, runners first establish a solid biomechanical and cardiovascular base by running miles—lots of miles—at a steady pace. They then ratchet up the intensity of their training regimen by adding interval workouts on a track, in which they run a series of shorter distances at or above their anaerobic thresholds; tempo runs, in which they run just below their anaerobic thresholds for twenty to thirty minutes; or fartlek workouts, in which they alternate faster and slower running over varying terrain. ("Fartlek" is a Swedish word meaning "speed play." In my long-ago experience a

hard fartlek workout was among the hardest of all workouts.) And they still rest their legs and bodies by tapering for several days or even a week before big races. But high-tech facilities like hypobaric training rooms with high-intensity treadmills and instruments that measure "VO2 max"—the maximum rate at which an individual can absorb and use oxygen during extreme physical activity—now enhance (or purport to enhance) the conditioning process, and coaches and runners alike now emphasize intentional psychological training more than ever before. Finally, some runners now wear the ultra-lightweight, springy carbon-fiber-plated racing shoes that have unquestionably improved runners' times in road races and marathons in recent years, but that may (or may not) improve performance on cross country's softer, more uneven surfaces.

* * *

After we arrived at the farm and disembarked from the bus, and with the start of the women's race still a couple of hours away, we went in search of the concessions that had been described in the official race program that the NCAA had posted on its website. I was hungry and eager to buy some race-related merch; I had hoped to find a tasty breakfast burrito and buy a souvenir hard copy of the program. Alas, I was severely disappointed, as the promised concessions consisted solely of two small tents located near a village of portable outhouses, one selling only the nondescript NCAA-licensed sweatshirt for the national championships and the other an unappetizing selection of prepackaged fast-food snacks and soft drinks. We had taken one of the earliest buses, but by the time we arrived at the concessions, the line for the sweatshirts was discouragingly long, and the food-and-drink tent had mostly sold out of its paltry

offerings. Someone—the NCAA, the university, or the farm—had missed a golden (albeit one-day) opportunity to cash in on the event.

Be that as it may, we occupied and enjoyed ourselves by wandering around the start and finish lines and walking nearby sections of the course; reading the information posted on the large electronic scoreboard; listening to the pre-race announcements and peppy music blasting from the public address system; inspecting the portable towers for the ESPN camera crews (remarkably, ESPN was broadcasting the event live); and mingling with other spectators. We were also able to closely observe and even converse with small groups of runners in their team uniforms who were warming up by walking or jogging portions of the course—a welcome contrast to many of today's high-profile intercollegiate sporting events, where the athletes seem to inhabit their own privileged world and are isolated from fans like unapproachable demigods.

Having lived in the American Southwest for many years, I had adopted Northern Arizona University as my personal fan favorite and was pleased to spot the NAU men's and women's teams warming up in their distinctive golden singlets. For most of his career Jay had worked as a researcher at the National Institutes of Health, and he is inclined, in all things, to apply the scientific method. Based on more objective information—including the results of the recent NCAA regional races and the fact that Oklahoma State University, after placing second in the 2022 men's championship race, had successfully recruited several elite young runners from East Africa and Morocco—he announced that he was putting his money on OSU, whose runners were easy to spot in their fluorescent orange singlets. He then announced (in a somewhat peremptory manner, I thought) that he was going to explore the rest of the course and the nearby countryside, and off he wandered, leaving me alone with my cell phone to try to contact several former runners from my college whom I hadn't seen in, oh, about forty-seven years but who had also

traveled to Charlottesville for the race. Thanks to my usual difficulties with my cell phone, that effort was only partially successful.

* * *

Today the NCAA DI cross-country national championships consist of a six-kilometer women's race and a ten-kilometer men's race. Those distances are longer than the most common race distances during the regular season, when the women typically run five kilometers, and the men, eight. (When Jay and I ran fifty years ago, the distances similarly increased from four or five miles during the regular season to six miles at the regional meets and national championship.) No one has ever adequately explained to me the reason for the significant increase in distances in the important races at the end of the season, other than sadism.

The men's championship race has been held every year since 1938; the women's race, thanks to Title IX, every year since 1981. These days the field in each race consists of the winning and second-place teams from each of the NCAA's nine regional races; thirteen additional at-large teams selected by the NCAA's "cross country subcommittee"; and thirty-eight additional individual qualifiers who are not members of a qualifying team, including at least four from each of the nine regions. This year a total of 254 men and the same number of women started their respective races at the national championships.

The history of the men's championship over the past fifty years is one of dynasties that rise and fall and rise again. In the 1970s the University of Oregon (think Steve Prefontaine) and the University of Texas at El Paso (one of the first American universities to actively recruit East African runners) dominated; in the 1980s, the Universities of Wisconsin and Arkansas; in the

1990s, Arkansas and Stanford University. Between 2000 and 2015 the dynasties clashed with each other and with a couple of relative newcomers, with Oregon, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Stanford, the University of Colorado, and Oklahoma State University each claiming at least a couple of titles. And then, in 2016, Northern Arizona University appeared on the scene and asserted itself, claiming the first of its six national titles.

These days most of the top college teams recruit runners from around the world. Much has been written about the running ability of various peoples from East Africa—primarily from certain tribal areas in Kenya and Ethiopia—and those young athletes, with their distinctive physiques—long, thin legs and lightweight body frames that seem particularly well-suited to long-distance running—were easily visible among the elite runners at the NCAA championships. But the teams' rosters also included runners from Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Morocco, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, among others. Say what you will about the current state of our country, America's promise of opportunity continues to attract people from around the world, and young athletes—young runners—come here to study, train, compete against the world's best, and try to run their way to a better life.

* * *

Jay had returned from his voyage of discovery, and using our cell phones, we had eventually found each other in the crowd, which, as more and more buses arrived at the farm, had been growing steadily larger since our arrival. Five thousand people may be a small number to watch an intercollegiate football or basketball game, but it is a huge number to watch a cross-country race. From my college years I don't remember a crowd larger than a couple of hundred,

even at our conference and regional meets. And this crowd was high-spirited, generating the atmosphere of an outdoor festival for running nerds. Call it Harrierfest.

The women's and men's courses at Panorama Farms shared the same start, which was wide enough to allow all the runners to stand shoulder to shoulder across it, one runner deep. Over the first five hundred meters—I'm trying hard here to adjust to the new metric world—the courses first trended downhill before climbing gradually to a low rise, narrowing, over that opening distance, to a width of twenty or so meters. From that point the courses wound through the farm's pastures and woods, gently rolling up and down, occasionally crossing themselves, and looping back to near the starting line. In the words of one college coach, the courses were "honest," i.e., they were challenging but not so hilly that the terrain would unduly skew the results. But, in the words of one of ESPN's commentators, the courses' shared finish was "cruel," consisting of a steep, one-hundred-meter-long downhill followed by an equally steep, one-hundred-meter-long uphill before the terrain relented and continued gradually uphill over the final hundred meters.

The crowd was coalescing around the start and finish lines and dispersing itself along the loops of the courses, like a giant amoeba extending its pseudopods. Jay and I discussed where to stand to view the race, finally selecting a spot near the summit of the first small rise. From there we had a distant but clear view of the start line and, by walking or jogging a hundred meters or so in various directions, of several other points along the course. As we staked out our spot, I found myself getting caught up in the excitement of the race and the day, and for a minute I forgot just how old and slow I am.

"I was thinking about jumping into the men's race," I said to Jay in a deluded, half-joking manner. "I think I can break thirty minutes."

He actually guffawed in response. But a minute later he appeared thoughtful, possibly even contrite. Perhaps he felt bad about the guffaw?

"For 5K?" he asked then, with feigned innocence.

Harrumph. I declined to respond.

* * *

Intercollegiate athletics in the United States is big business, and that business is managed in large part by the NCAA, a nonprofit corporation whose membership includes more than 1,100 colleges and universities. In 2021 the NCAA generated more than $1.224 billion in revenue, mostly from broadcast rights for intercollegiate football and basketball. The NCAA annually distributes that money to its member schools (minus a generous overhead, of course). Under the NCAA's current rules, to be a member of NCAA Division I—the top tier of intercollegiate sports—a college must sponsor a minimum of fourteen sports. (If a college wishes to compete in the NCAA's Division I Football Bowl Subdivision—the highest level of intercollegiate football, the football of Alabama, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio State, and the like—it must sponsor a minimum of sixteen sports.) For various reasons—including media exposure, perceived prestige, alumni pressure, and, last but not least, a share of the NCAA's broadcast revenue—many colleges aspire to be members of NCAA Division I. Today, in fact, there are 364 members.

In order to field the required number of intercollegiate sports to be a member of Division I, colleges are always looking for cheap sports to sponsor. Because cross country requires no facilities and almost no equipment, it is the cheapest. (In the early 1970s my college cross-country team's annual budget was less than a thousand dollars, which paid for uniforms, two

pairs of shoes per runner per season, and limited travel. We trained at no cost to the university in city parks and on city streets and cadged other necessities—ace bandages, adhesive tape, Ben Gay, occasional ice baths—from the university's athletic center when the football players didn't need them.) Moreover, even if a college doesn't award athletic scholarships for cross country, a college may emphasize cross country in its athletic program and, with some decent coaching, become competitive at a fairly high level. Of course, even in cross country the elite teams award athletic scholarships (usually requiring the recipients to run both cross country and track), which considerably increases the cost of the sport. But the fact remains that if a college decides, for whatever reason, that it wants to be competitive in cross country, it can usually do so.

A case in point is Northern Arizona University. Although the school had a respectable history of distance running dating back to the 1970s, it rose to prominence in the 2010s under the guidance of a couple of good coaches who secured modest financial support from the university. And "modest" is the word. In 2023, according to official, publicly available information, the university budgeted $634,895 for men's track and field *and* cross country, and $886,319 for women's track and field *and* cross country. So for about $1.52 million the university gets credit from the NCAA for sponsoring four intercollegiate sports, and those sports have garnered both national and international recognition for the university. By comparison, in 2023 NAU budgeted more than $3.81 million for its forgettable men's football program. Mike Smith, the current head coach of the men's and women's cross-country and track-and-field teams, earns a salary of $119,000 per year (although that amount is undoubtedly supplemented by allowable side deals). *The Athletic* recently reported that Drew Bosley and Nico Young, two of NAU's top runners, may sign sponsorship deals with Adidas, including name, image, and likeness provisions, but I

question how much money they will realize from the deals. Even today, even at the highest levels, one does not coach or run cross country for the money.

On the other hand, Flagstaff is a fun, funky college town; it is located in scenic northern Arizona, at the base of the spectacular San Francisco Peaks and seventy-five miles from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon; it has easy access to varied terrain and hundreds of miles of trails and unpaved U.S. Forest Service roads; it enjoys good, year-round weather; and it is located at seven thousand feet elevation and naturally provides the well-known benefits of high-altitude training. A certain kind of kid—a certain kind of runner—just wants to go there.

* * *

From our vantage point near the summit of the first small rise Jay and I looked toward the start line. At precisely 10:20 a.m., with what seemed little fanfare, the line of 254 women surged forward; an instant later we heard the starting gun; and the race was suddenly underway, the women sprinting the first slight downhill, racing for an advantageous early position as the course narrowed. A minute later, they were flowing by us in a fast-moving wave, and we were nearly swept away by a sea of ponytails. Most were wearing the skimpy, bikini-like athletic shorts favored these days by elite female runners—outfits that simultaneously attracted my old man's prurient interest and made the old man in me blush. Receiving information transmitted from the chips in the racers' bibs, the electronic scoreboard near the finish line was constantly updating, flashing the real-time places and kilometer split times of each runner and the real-time scores of each team. Jay had brought his binoculars, and he periodically trained them on the scoreboard, relaying pertinent information to me. For us older spectators, it all seemed slightly miraculous.

After the frenetic start Parker Valby, from the University of Florida, who had finished second last year after leading for most of the race, grabbed the lead and set a ferocious pace. By the halfway point she had built a twenty-second advantage over a small group of her closest rivals, and this year no one was going to catch her. Although Doris Lemngole, from the University of Alabama, closed the gap to ten seconds over the final kilometer, Valby cruised to victory in 18:55.2. Katelyn Tuohy, from North Carolina State University, who had won last year's race after catching Valby in the final kilometer, finished fifth in 19:23.0. (After the race word quickly spread among the crowd that Tuohy had been sick the entire week before the race.) For the team title NCSU edged Northern Arizona University by a score of 123-124—another remarkably close finish—giving NCSU its third consecutive title.

The men's 10K race started fifty minutes later, at precisely 11:10 a.m. Like the women's race, the start was impressively fast. When the men passed our spot along the course, with the closest runners only a foot or two from where we were standing, they reminded me of a herd of stampeding horses. I actually felt a whoosh of air as they passed. (Even in my college years, at my fastest, I would have been at the back of the main pack.) As the race progressed over the next five kilometers, a lead pack of about a dozen men separated itself from the field, although the runners within the lead pack were constantly trading places. Their pace was electric: the first kilometer under two minutes and thirty seconds, the next four kilometers under three minutes per kilometer. By the five-kilometer mark even the lead pack had begun to fray, and by the eight-kilometer mark only four runners remained in contention for the individual title: Graham Blanks of Harvard University, Habtom Samuel of the University of New Mexico, Ky Robinson of Stanford, and Denis Kipngetich of Oklahoma State University. Blanks and Samuel then dropped Robinson and Kipngetich, and Blanks unleashed a brutal, extended kick over the final kilometer

to win the race in 28:37.7, becoming the first man from an Ivy League college ever to win the championship. (Two weeks later he set a new collegiate record for the indoor five-kilometer on the track, using a similar brutal kick to break the competition and win in 13:03.78.) The top fifty men's finishers averaged less than three minutes per kilometer, or just under 4:50 per mile. (What impressed me even more was the realization that the top fifty men therefore ran three consecutive two-mile splits in just under 9:40.)

Oklahoma State won the men's team title over Northern Arizona by a score of 49 to 71. NAU placed five runners in the top twenty-five, which in most years would have been good enough to win the team title, but OSU placed five runners in the top fifteen. As is too often the case, I had to admit (albeit somewhat grudgingly) that Jay's pre-race prediction was more accurate than mine.

* * *

As Jay and I rode the shuttle bus back to the shopping mall parking lot, we felt energized by what we had seen. Watching young, good athletes compete at the peak of their abilities is always a thrilling experience, showcasing both the beauty of athletic endeavor and the unpredictability of athletic competition. But what else did we take away from the race? First, despite advancements in facilities and equipment and more carefully monitored training methods, performance in collegiate cross country has improved only slightly, if at all, over the past fifty years. In 1973 about 220 men ran the six-mile-long NCAA cross-country championship race on the Hangman Valley Golf Course in Spokane, Washington. Steve Prefontaine won that race in 28:14.8. Assuming that he had continued to run that same pace for another 0.21 mile, his

time over a ten-kilometer course would have been about 29:14, or about thirty-seven seconds slower than Graham Blanks's winning time at Panorama Farms. Photos of the 1973 race and Internet chatter from people who ran it indicate that the course was hilly, with a couple of congested ninety-degree turns near the start—several runners actually tripped and fell—and that the runners' times were correspondingly slow. So the winning times in the two races were probably comparable. Much of Prefontaine's enduring reputation rests on his mental toughness, and particularly on his ability to prevail in head-to-head matchups with his rivals. But Blanks displayed a similar determination at Panorama Farms. So, in a hypothetical matchup between Prefontaine and Blanks, who would win? Of course—and this is part of the beauty of sport—no one can say. All one can say is that the race would be fast and close, and it would be a sight to see.

What about the depth of the field? In 1973 twenty-three men finished within a minute of Prefontaine's winning time, and fifty within a minute and a half. In 2023 twenty-seven men finished within a minute of Blanks's winning time, and sixty within a minute and a half. So, yes, incremental improvement, but nothing dramatic. All of which was somewhat reassuring, in a totally self-serving way, to Jay and me, increasingly decrepit relics from that earlier era.

Second, the championship races at Panorama Farms also demonstrated the amazing impact on collegiate athletics of Title IX, which Congress enacted as part of the Education Amendments of 1972. In 1973 there was no women's championship race. In fact, the women at my college were only beginning to organize a cross-country team that had the university's half-hearted and very limited financial support. (At the time I think that most college athletic departments were incredulous that Title IX actually meant what it clearly said.) Now

intercollegiate women's sports are more or less equal to men's in terms of participation and funding and attract almost as much media and fan attention. We've come a long way, baby.

Finally, although watching running races on a screen is usually dreadfully boring (even for runners or former runners, who presumably have an elevated interest in the sport), ESPN's live coverage of the two championship races, which we later viewed on YouTube, was exceptional. In addition to the cameras on the portable towers, ESPN placed cameras on the utility vehicles that led the runners around the courses and on drones that provided spectacular aerial views of the runners, the courses, and the surrounding countryside. And the commentary was informed and enthusiastic, with little of the hyperbole that often demeans sports coverage. Of course, the races' compressed timeframe—the women's race completed in about twenty minutes, the men's in about thirty—increases their drama and enhances their watchability.

I had registered to run a 5K turkey trot on Thanksgiving morning—the following Thursday—and I tried to entice Jay to drive down to Charlottesville again to run it with me. Although I neglected to mention this fact to him, I had been training hard for several weeks—cranking out two or three nine-minute miles several days per week—and I was pretty sure I could take him. In our last head-to-head competition—a 5K turkey trot several years ago—he had beaten me by ten seconds.

"C'mon down," I said coyly, "and we'll jog the race together."

He wasn't buying.

"I don't think so," he said irascibly. "But you could come to DC next spring, and we could do a 5K in Rock Creek Park."

"That's an interesting idea," I said warily. "Let me think about it.

# # #