Living in a medium size city in central France in the mid-1970s and running for the local club, I would trot down to the stadium as a warm-up and pass colleagues walking there in their tracksuits. They dismissed the idea of running to the stadium, implying that friends, neighbours and casual observers would think they were crazy. It wasn’t so different in the UK at that time. When I began running in the mid-1960s, it was, as is observed in Running across Europe, edited by Jeroen Scheerder and Koen Beedveld with Julie Borgers, ‘considered a strange activity,’ ‘jogging along the street, in a park, or in a forest…risked being scoffed and jeered at’. Within twenty years, however, I began to complain that next door’s granny knew more about long-distance running than I did.

Before I go further, I want to say a word or two about ‘jogging’. Whenever my neighbours accuse me of it, I swiftly correct them, with ‘running, NOT jogging’. Those of us from the pre-fun-running era guard our origins religiously.

Joking apart, in one sense (I’ll come to the other later), jogging, fun-running, speed-walking, whatever gets you off the sofa and into the street, stadium, park or forest has been one of the best innovations of the latter part of the 20th century. And the authors who contributed to this extensive survey do an excellent and comprehensive job of charting the rise, fall and rise again of European running and, ahem, jogging since the mass runs and invention of the big-city marathons in the 1970s started the boom, not only in running related exercise, but in the industry – shoes, clothes, watches, water-bottles, music machines, et al. – that accompanies it.

Like many a modern innovation, ‘mass running,’ say the authors, ‘has its roots in the United States’ which is largely true, but ignores both the incongruous example of the huge winter cross-country day of racing, sponsored by the Communist party newspaper, L’Humanité in Paris since the 1930s; and the Round the Bays race in New Zealand, whose debut was virtually concurrent with the event which is generally...
recognised as popularising running worldwide, the New York City Marathon, born 1970.

From there, the ascent was unstoppable. The venerable Boston Marathon, the world oldest continuous long distance race (wars notwithstanding), created as it was the year after the inaugural Olympic Marathon in 1896, expanded its fields by 500% throughout the 1970s. And that was with the caveat of a qualifying time (currently 3.05 for men, aged 18-34, and 3.35 for women). New York during the same decade boasted an increase from just 55 participants to 10,477!

That was how it all began; and this book traces the explosion of interest and races in Europe (I recall almost 100 marathons a year in the UK at one stage), the subsequent decline in interest; followed by the second wave at the end of the 1990s, which continues until now.

As its title suggests, this is serious study of the running market from an economic point of view. Written by and for academics is not for everyone, certainly not Jo(e) Jogger unless (s)he is involved in the sales/marketing side of the running industry, now worth billions of euros (e.g. expenditure by runners on equipment in 2012 was gauged at 9.6 billion euros). It includes a valuable survey of the structure and support systems (clubs, other organisations), along with levels of participation, history, trends and event breakdowns in countries as diverse as Belgium, Denmark, England (as distinct from UK), Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain.

Finally the ‘other’ aspect of jogging that I referred to above. This book mentions the large percentage of unaffiliated runners, i.e. those without a club or indeed any interest in joining. This is the downside of the mass running movement. Let me make it clear, I speak as an elite runner, not necessarily a good one, but one who began, and continued running, because I loved the idea of competition, and 50 years later, I still do. I have no problem with those who have little or no interest in competition; but it’s a shame that the national federations and their clubs have largely failed to tap into this huge wave of new participants in running, and tried to turn them into competitors.

Even worse (at least in the UK), the people who have graduated to being club secretaries are essentially former joggers, and as such, have no idea of what it takes to become a good runner, foremost among which is the capacity to hurt yourself in training. If they don’t know how to train, how can they teach/advise newcomers how to train? That, along with the explosion of excellence in (principally) East African running at an elite level has left European elites (real elites in this case) lagging far behind. But that is another story, and one that still needs to be addressed.

Reviewed by Pat Butcher

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Jeroen Scheerder and Koen Breedveld (Eds.)

Running Across Europe
The Rise and Size of One of the Largest Sports Markets
London: Palgrave MacMillan
ISBN: 9781137446367
£ 65.00