Female endurance athletes
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Over the last 15 years or so, the growing popularity and rapid rise in the standard of women's athletics have prompted many seminars, articles and books which purport to describe the specific problems that may influence the performances of women athletes. All of these include the word 'women' or 'female' in their titles, but far too many of them merely trot out well-known concepts of athletic training which apply equally to both sexes. Female Endurance Athletes is a collection of papers, some of which, refreshingly, live up to the title and generalize only when necessary to clarify the specific references to women's running. Unfortunately, others could just as well have omitted the word 'female' from their titles with very little or no alteration to the text.

The first paper is a well-researched historical survey of the progress of women's athletics from the period of 'the ancient societies of Egypt, Crete, Greece and Rome' through to the present day. Although it has the specific title 'The Female American Runner: A Modern Quest for Visibility', the treatment is quite general. Certainly, what took place in America in the early years of this century was mirrored in England - the English Women's Amateur Athletic Association was founded in 1922 and at about the same time the American Amateur Athletic Union voted 'to have women register for all sports within their jurisdiction'.

The paper 'Women and Endurance: Some Factors Influencing Performance' is worth reading for its very clear explanation of muscle metabolism alone, but it also deals with the energy yielding processes with special application to female endurance athletes. Its conclusion that: 'There are more physiological similarities than differences between men and women... Training appears to reduce the gender differences in many physiological characteristics and in performance,' will be welcomed by all coaches experienced in coaching women athletes.

The paper on 'The Psychology of the Female Runner' is the least credible and least valuable to the running coach. Statements that runners are 'more intelligent, imaginative, self-sufficient, tender minded, outgoing, enthusiastic, venturesome and astute than the general population' will not endear runners to the general public!

The paper entitled 'Biomechanics of Distance Running: A Focus on Women' does not focus on women! It is in fact a good example of the use of a biomechanical technique to elucidate
what is patently obvious to anybody with two eyes.

The paper 'Nutrition for the Female Distance Runner' is interesting and informative — but the word 'female' could have been left out of the title.

Again, the paper on 'Effects of Marathon Running on Blood Chemistry Profiles' is not orientated towards female runners. The conclusion that 'marathon running induces abnormal blood chemistry values that are normal physiological responses to the stresses imposed' is interesting, but by no means new. Finnish researchers were saying similar things about the blood chemistry of 'competition-fit' runners 50 years ago. Most coaches of female runners will agree whole-heartedly with the conclusion: 'We did not find many differences between male and female runners. It appears that physiological responses to long-distance running are relatively similar for all.'

The same sort of conclusion is drawn in the paper on 'Gender Heat Tolerance', but this time the focus is on the female athlete.

The subject of the paper on 'Athletic Amenorrhea' enforces a strict adherence to the title Female Endurance Athletes. It presents a good overview of the research carried out on in this area during the last 20 years.

In conclusion, this book attempts to focus on women in distance running events. That it does not completely succeed to meet this objective is due partly to the comparatively short time that women have been permitted to indulge in these events, and the resulting paucity of research and empirical conclusions. It is also due to the fact that women have proved themselves so good at these events. Good women runners are not much different from the men!

by Jim Alford