

When Sport Becomes Spectacle

— by Patrick Clark | illustration by Jessica Taylor, April 22, 2007

The curious story of an Amazon-swimmer, ultra-marathoner and scantily-clad mountaineer



A swimmer, a runner and a climber are sitting in a bar together. A self-consciously masculine bunch, the men size each other up over a pint. Martin Strel, an overweight Slovenian swimmer with a graying beard, speaks first. He casually mentions that he swam the length of the Amazon River in 66 days, averaging 50 miles per day as he battled piranhas, anacondas, sunburn and dangerously high blood pressure.

Dean Karnazes, a runner, will not be one-upped; he takes a long sip from his glass. With perfect timing and practiced delivery honed by years of motivational speaking experience, he counters: “This fall, I ran 50 marathons in 50 days.”

Wim Hof, a mountaineer who ran a half-marathon above the Arctic Circle wearing nothing but shorts (that’s right, he was barefoot) and who regularly holds his breath under icy water for up to six minutes, speaks last. “What amazing feats,” he says. “But can you deliberately regulate your own core body temperature?” As Strel and Karnazes stare at him, mouths agape, Hof tells the two that he is preparing to summit Mt. Everest nearly naked. He’d wear nothing were it not for modesty.

But in this new breed of adventure sporting, modesty is decidedly not an issue. These three men regularly attempt such singularly outrageous feats that they have no set standards against which to measure their audacity or endurance. Pressing their respective sports—swimming, running, climbing—to such ridiculous and dangerous extremes, Strel, Karnazes and Hof have shifted the emphasis of their athletic endeavors from competition against others to the completion of harrowing journeys.

The shift in focus has not been accompanied by a retreat from competitiveness. Instead, the new adventure sportsmen have found a different arena in which to vie for supremacy—that of self-promotion. In the process, they have found themselves classified by popular news media as the elite pantheon of their respective sports, challenging rank-and-file endurance athletes’ conception of their community as the last bastion of pure sport.

Miles of Trials, Trials of Miles

The “pure sport” that Strel, Hof and Karnazes have sullied is defined, for me, by a cliché-addled book. Like every other self-identifying American distance runner, I have read John L. Parker’s cult classic novel, *Once a Runner*. Tracing the life of his

protagonist, Quentin Cassidy, Parker provides insight into the individual psychology of a young track athlete.

The pages of *Once a Runner* are filled with reminiscences of solitary miles logged in training runs, incidents in which Quentin's friends and acquaintances struggle to understand his inner obsession and rich descriptions of the personally satisfying rewards of winning a foot-race. While Parker focuses his study on a character's individual psychology, he both reflects upon and recreates a collective distance running psychology, helping to explain how runners define both the community that constitutes their sport and the ethic that animates it.

The first tenet of this romanticized self-definition is the belief that runners are misunderstood by their non-running friends, and as such, they form their own self-referential peer group. Victory in competition is an important component of many runners' identities, but it fails to define who is part of the community and who exists outside of it.

The glue that binds this group together is not print media, ethnic identity or a deep belief in democracy—it is the shared experience of “removing, molecule by molecule, the very tough rubber that comprise[s] the bottoms of training shoes.” Being a runner is about self-imposed loneliness. All other accomplishments—winning races, setting records, becoming, as Parker writes, “legends in our own time”—occur within the context of this community that understands and appreciates the solitude behind the rewards.

In this way, American runners and other endurance athletes wear their anonymity with a certain pride—their iconic athletes are faceless to those who do not share their passion for solitary training. This becomes, for them, the defining characteristic of “pure sport” and helps distinguish the runners, climbers and bicycle riders of the world from their soccer, baseball and football playing counter-parts.

Haile Gebreselasie, the Ethiopian Olympic champion, will never achieve the name recognition of Michael Jordan or Nomar Garciaparra. While baseball players like Johnny Damon show up in the society pages of the latest *People Magazine*, “pure sport” is defined by its lack of spectacle.

Karno! Karno! Karno!

Dare-devils like Strel, Karnazes and Hof have carved out athletic identities in direct contrast with the prevailing idea of self in their respective sports. Although each has his own “trials of miles” story to tell, these men have committed the cardinal sin of their sporting communities by turning sport into spectacle.

Rather than merely earning the respect of their fellow athletes, they have striven to build cults of personality. Instead of seeking to be understood, these athletes have attempted to capitalize on the public's perception of their lunacy and have earned intrigue, not respect. Strel, Karnazes and Hof remain true to their lactic-acid addicted compatriots in their refusal to seek understanding from the general public, but they pervert their sports' first tenant by using it to create the very sensationalism that they desire.

Of the three, Karnazes is the most narcissistic. The author of *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner*, Karnazes has nicknamed himself "Karno," and tours universities giving motivational speeches. Somehow, between epic 300-mile runs and public speaking engagements, Karno also manages to write columns for *Men's Health* magazine and pose for *GQ* (who named him 2004's "best body of the year"). Sponsored by North Face, Karno regularly updates numerous blogs, allowing interested web-browsers to pinpoint where in the world he is running. A promotional picture on Northface's publicity page for Karno notes in a caption that "endurance is running 70 miles straight, for a training run."

Not to be outdone, Strel boasts a promotional web page of his own. Strel's page details his trip down the Amazon River and also notes that he has swum the length of the Mississippi, the Yangtze and the Danube. Constant updates by Strel's support team keep fans and admirers up to date with his medical condition, which is normally listed as "critical."

Blog entries generally report that Stel continues to swim for "peace and clean water" even though his doctors have advised him to rest. Links on the sidebar direct visitors to promotional pages for a book (*The Amazon King*) and a documentary movie (*Big River Man*) that are in the works.

Hof, the shyest of the group, has yet to develop his own webpage. However, Google searches with the query "Wim Hof" or "Everest in shorts" yield links to articles on the BBC and other mainstream sources. Bloggers have written about Hof's arctic and alpine adventures under headlines such as "Wim Hof Still Looking to Kill Himself," where they opine about the insanity of our bare-chested mountaineering hero.

Perhaps Hof's relative lack of publicity is a result of his mutant-like physical capabilities—while Karnazes and Strel are simply taking more mundane human activities to outrageous lengths. Hof is doing something more super-human in regulating his own body temperature to survive in hostile environments.

Part of the media intrigue aroused by Karnazes and Strel is a function of their affected "everyman" status. Karnazes never tires of mentioning that he began ultramarathoning after he ran 30 miles home from a party while intoxicated and Strel, unlike most elite swimmers, is visibly overweight.

Their regular-guy statuses add to the illusion of lunacy that Karnazes and Strel seek to cultivate—readers can imagine themselves attempting to swim the length of the Amazon and gasp in disbelief. Hof's physical attributes, on the other hand, somehow make his death-defying treks appear somewhat more mundane: he is, the audience realizes, uniquely suited for his endeavors.

Spectacle and what it means to be "elite"

While the accomplishments of Karnazes, Strel and Hof cannot be overlooked, their individual efforts to promote themselves have paid dividends that their running/swimming/climbing compatriots resent. The very solitary, unglamorous nature of endurance athletics' claim as "pure sport" creates a situation in which elite athletes, as defined by the sporting community's standards, are invisible to the general public.

I doubt that the average *Indy* reader is familiar with the names of Adam Goucher, Ryan Hall or Dathan Ritzenhein who currently populate the ranks of America's elite runners. However, the systematic efforts of the world's Karnos to get their name out there have given them a place in the popular imagination as the country's elite endurance athletes, even though Karnazes's best marathon time would place him squarely in the middle of the pack.

The gap between the values embodied by Dean Karnazes as a figurehead for the sport and the sports' self-identified elites has dangerous implications for the way that the endurance sporting community is understood in popular discourse. While athletes like Lance Armstrong or Bob Kennedy (who nearly won the 1996 Atlanta Olympics 5k) are generally respected for their audacity and work ethic, "elites" like Karnazes give the sport a face that belongs in an asylum.

With the shift from competition among peers on an empty stretch of road to competition between personalities for media attention, true sport has bled into spectacle, betraying the solitary ethic of endurance athletics. Strel, Karnazes and Hof will probably never meet in a bar for a pint, but I wouldn't be surprised to see them together, jockeying for attention on *Good Morning America*.

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