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Black Runners Are Changing the Face of the Sport

More African-Americans tackle marathons, half-marathons and 5Ks, bucking overall participation trends



African-American runners in the Atlanta Track Club, which operates the 10K Peachtree Road Race, have grown to 17% of total membership. *PHOTO: PAUL KIM/ATLANTA TRACK CLUB*

By RACHEL BACHMAN

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As participation in weekend 5Ks and marathons slows after years of growth, one group is gaining: More African-Americans than ever are taking up running.

New running groups, a thirst for healthy life choices and even a comedian are changing the face of what has long been a mostly white sport.

Christina Lushatt Thomas recalls asking her insurance agent about the medals on his wall two years ago. He'd earned them for finishing a marathon and half-marathon, he said.

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The 43-year-old respiratory therapist in Fort Worth, Texas, was surprised that people could get medals without placing in the top three of a competition. Ms. Lushatt Thomas also didn't know any other African-Americans, like her agent, who had run such long races. She reached the finish of a half-marathon a few weeks later, has run dozens of races since and has her husband and 15-year-old son into running, too.

"I fell in love with it," she says.



The District Running Collective holds weekly runs in Washington, D.C. that often exceed 100 people. *PHOTO: MICHAEL TUTU*

Nationwide, the share of frequent runners who identified as African-American has surged to 8% from 1.6% in 2011, according to a survey by Running USA, an industry-backed group that tracks trends.

The change is most pronounced in larger cities. The New York Road Runners, who operate the Nov. 6 New York City Marathon, saw the number of entrants in their events with the groups Black Men Run and Black Girls Run! more than triple in three years, to nearly 3,000 last year.

Rich Kenah, executive director of the Atlanta Track Club, says the increase in African-American runners is helping buck the nationwide trend of declining road-race participation and drive popularity of the club's events, along with making them more social. African-American runners make up 17% of the 26,000-member club, up from 12% last year.

"I see two, three, four, five women coming across the line together, laughing, celebrating accomplishments," Mr. Kenah says. "Contrast that with years ago, it's one person crossing the line, looking at their watch."

African-Americans have long excelled at track and field from high school to the Olympics, and athletes of African descent dominate professional distance running. But black people have been rarer among amateur distance runners in the U.S. About 83% of frequent distance runners are white, according to Running USA.



A runner with the Washington-based District Running Collective competes in the Chicago Half Marathon earlier this month. PHOTO: DAVID JAEWON OH

Women fueled the latest running boom, flooding half-marathons and charity races and pushing the number of finishers in road races to an all-time high of 19 million in 2013. But that number fell to 17 million last year as people younger than 35 ditched running for yoga, weightlifting and indoor-cycling classes.

As that shift was happening, social media spread the word of newly formed African-American running groups.

Toni Carey says that before she and college friend Ashley Hicks-Rocha founded Black Girls Run! as a blog in 2009, other African-Americans would ask, “Why are you running? Black people don’t run.” The Atlanta-based group now counts more than 200,000 Facebook followers and 70 chapters nationwide, and they don’t get the question much anymore, Ms. Carey says.

A quest for better health has been a powerful motivator, runners say. African-Americans carry a greater risk of obesity, heart disease and stroke than the general population. Many black people start running to help them lose weight, leaders of running groups say.

James Ravenell of New York’s Harlem neighborhood says he’s always been slender, but several years ago felt so unfit that his chest hurt when he ran to catch the bus. The 42-year-old IT systems administrator first started cycling. Then a friend roped him into running the Brooklyn Half Marathon in 2014.

At the end of the race, Mr. Ravenell recalls, “I said, ‘I’m hurting so bad, I’m never doing this again.’ And then I signed up for another race.”

Mr. Ravenell created a Facebook page in 2015 to organize a small gathering of African-American runners at the Miami Marathon and Half Marathon. By the time he got back to New York, more than 100 people had joined the Facebook group.

He renamed the group Black Runners Connection, and it’s expanded to more than 1,500 members who share training routes and post photos of finishers’ medals. You don’t have to be black to join the group, Mr. Ravenell says.

Matthew Green got interested in running after seeing social-media posts by urban running crews in New York and London who integrate running with creative projects and parties.



Atlanta-based Black Men Run launched in 2013 and has about 50 chapters nationwide and in London and Paris. A member of the group broke his foot two weeks before the 2015 Virginia Beach Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon. Three other BMR runners pushed him the entire half-marathon route in a wheelchair. *PHOTO: MICHAEL STINSON*

“It was like DJs and artists and designers—all these different people that you wouldn’t think are runners,” says Mr. Green, who is 29. Three years ago, he and three friends turned a midnight run on his birthday into a group called the District Running Collective. It holds Wednesday night runs with more than 100 people, travels to compete in races and socialize with other running crews and this year landed a sponsorship from Under Armour.

Comedian Kevin Hart has invited his 31 million Twitter followers to join him for spontaneous 5K runs that have attracted thousands of people, many of them beginners.

Mr. Hart recently became the first comedian to have his own Nike shoe. In August he posted photos and videos of himself on Instagram running in Oregon’s grueling 199-mile Hood to Coast relay, which features teams of eight to 12 runners. In a post-event YouTube video he called the race “my Olympics.”



Comedian Kevin Hart has raised the profile of amateur distance running among African-Americans, tweeting invitations to 5K runs like this 2015 event in Toronto. PHOTO: RICK MADONIK/THE TORONTO STAR/ZUMA PRESS

USA Track and Field, the sport's governing body, recently announced a yearlong partnership with the 12-year-old National Black Marathoners Association. The groups are launching running and walking programs at African-American churches in Dallas, Atlanta, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and other cities.

Tony Reed, NBMA's co-founder and executive director, predicts the next running boom will be driven by ethnic minorities. African-Americans make up 13.3% of the U.S. population. Hispanic people also are underrepresented in running, making up 6% of frequent distance runners, according to Running USA, but 17.6% of the population.

NBMA's membership, which includes runners who do distances shorter than marathons, is up more than 30% from last year, to 4,700, Mr. Reed says.

Mr. Reed says that as more women started running, marketers took note and created more events and products for them. Likewise, he has lobbied event directors to ask for registrants' racial identity so they can chart growth among various groups and market to them.

"When the races say they don't track this information," he says, "they often don't realize how much business they're losing."

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