If you've raced at least once in your life, you've thought it: "I just don't want to be last." Of all the things that can go south on race day, surely this is the worst. Nothing spells failure like D-F-L. But is it so horrible? So soul-smashingly awful? We tracked down members of this feared and misunderstood runnerhood—

DEAD FREAKIN' LAST

those who have literally brought up the rear and those who have been within spitting distance of it—willing to spill about finishing in the way back of the pack. Turns out, it's not that bad. Sure, there can be tears and hard lessons, but there's humor, joy, camaraderie, and even honor back there, too.

...AND PROUD OF IT!

By A.C. Shilton
Illustrations by Rami Niemi

After finishing in the way, way, way back...

SHE HAD THE LAST LAUGH

Erin Hazler, 39, staff auditor, Ellettsville, Indiana. Gave her less-than-speedy finish a humorous twist on her blog, persistentrunner.blogspot.com.

"After a crappy race it can be kind of weird to run through the chute when all the fast people are sitting facing the chute because the awards started. But I ran the [2012 Southwestway Park trail] race, so screw it; I'm gonna cross the finish line like everyone else. I did the work! It was just a little slower. Now to the awesome. My crazy running group/family tore into the chute to make a power arch for me, screaming like lunatics! If more slow people got this kind of finish, maybe they would show up for these things? So my friends cause such a ruckus, the announcer stops the awards to point out that I must have quite a fan base. Then there I was, staring at all these people. My brain said, *You should say something.* So I did: 'TAKE THAT, FAST PEOPLE!'"

THE *final* WORD

VIA FACEBOOK On my birthday, I "ran" the Colfax Half Marathon. Around mile 11, I hear "squeak, squeak, squeak," behind me. Not wanting to get discouraged by seeing I'm last, I didn't turn around. Eventually the squeaking gets closer and closer to me until it finally passes me. There, pushing her oxygen cart, is a little old lady. She looks back at me and yells, "Keep it up, sweetie!" and leaves me in her dust. **BETHANY HALL**, 47, GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO

SHE BECAME A "RUNNING ANGEL"

Bonnie Fowler, 49, certified financial planner, Toronto, Ontario. Started "Bonnie's Dream Team," which provides runner volunteers for way-back-of-the-packers to help them reach the finish.

"My first marathon was the Toronto Waterfront Marathon in 2012. I'm slow, and by the time the half-marathon split off from the full, the crowds were gone. Luckily, I wasn't alone. My training partner ran with me because there were no pacers for my expected finish time, and from 32K to 42K, a few friends joined us. During the last 10 kilometers, I saw all these runners struggling. The next morning, I got the idea for Bonnie's Dream Team. I had people to help me, but these people didn't. I tell faster runners, 'You have no idea what it's like at the back of the pack. People are stopping, sitting on the side of the road, giving up, with no one to take their hand and say, "Okay let's walk this out; you can do this."' Bonnie's Dream Team staggers Running Angels at 32K, 35K, and 38K. We identify who is having a hard time, and ask, 'Can we run with you?' Some people we run with for 1K, some we run with for five or six, and they say, 'No, no, don't leave me.' Some runners just need a smile or an encouraging word. Members of the team will tell you they've never experienced anything so emotional—people thanking them, hugging them. It's incredible."

THE *final* WORD

@lizgross144: New Years Eve. My second 5K. Windchill below zero. Eyelashes frozen. 657/687. One friend waited at finish.

THE *final* WORD

VIA FACEBOOK A few years ago I beat Superman in a 5K trail race. I thought I was dead last but discovered that my time had eclipsed that of a runner named Clark Kent (seriously). **MIKE WYKES**, 66, KENTWOOD, MICHIGAN

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TREVOR PITTMAN (HAZLER)

CONSOLATION PRIZES

Some races save the best for the last

- There are only two prizes given out at **Mainly Marathons** events, a series of multiday, multistate races. The last-place finishers of the half marathon and marathon get a vintage toy caboose with a plaque reading, "The Best Is Last." Series founder Clint Burleson says he once saw a guy push his girlfriend across the line so he could "win." mainlymarathons.com

- In the past, it's been a dream catcher or a statuette of an eagle. For participants in the **Mohican Trail 100 Mile Run** in Loudonville, Ohio, the Last of the Mohican's award changes every year. Runners don't learn what the award is until race day, but it's always related to Indians or forest animals. ombc.net/mohican-100-trail-run/mohican-100-trail-run-general-info

- Bring up the rear at the **Weymouth Woods 100K Trail Run** in Southern Pines, North Carolina, and nab a hand-sculpted turtle from a local potter. "I've always had a lot of respect for the last-place finishers," says race director Marie Lewis. "The fast people have been home for hours before these guys come in. I wanted to recognize their effort." etinternet.net/~runrbike/weymouth-info.htm

- The final finisher of **The Umstead 100 Mile Endurance Run** in Raleigh, North Carolina, gets a little something from the stream that runs along the course: a Persistence Rock. Attached to the rock is a metal plate with the inscription "Persistence prevails when all else fails." He or she also receives a special "Norwoodie" walking stick made from native North Carolina hardwoods. umstead100.org

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES FOR ASICS (HALL)

SHE MADE A NEW FRIEND

Kathy Contreras, 44, stay-at-home-mom, Aurora, Illinois. Getting lost in her first marathon netted her a lifelong buddy.

"Around mile 16 [of the 2013 Naperville Marathon in Illinois], I realized I hadn't seen a directional sign in a while. I tried to look up the course on my phone, but the names on the map and the actual street names weren't the same. I was freaking out, like, *This is crap, how am I supposed to finish if I don't know where to go*? I was about to call my husband when I saw a guy holding a sign with toilet paper taped to it that said, 'Don't poop out now.' I cracked up. There was a forest preserve officer [named Lou] standing there, too, and he said, 'Run down this road and I'll meet you on the other side.' He got in his truck and escorted me the rest of the way. He had this button to change the street lights. At one point, Lou said, 'If you finish this, I'll run it next year.' He didn't believe I would. Lou messaged his sister, Carla, and she came running up to me with a half mile to go—I ran in with Carla, my husband, and my daughter. It was the best finish ever. Even the poop-sign guy was there! And I wasn't even last—there were two guys behind me! Lou went so far out of his way for me that day; I will love that man for the rest of my life. And now he's running—he wasn't a runner before, but he's done two half marathons since then. His wife said to me, 'You wouldn't believe the change in him.'"

After finishing DFL...

HE FOUND HIS TRUE CALLING

Ryan Hall, 32, pro marathoner, Flagstaff, Arizona. Finishing last on the track revealed his talent for the marathon.

"It was the 5,000-meter race at the 2006 London Grand Prix—the field was stacked with world record holder (then and now), ➜

THE *final* WORD

VIA FACEBOOK I was last in a 5K a couple years ago. I had started getting sick because (1) my mother had cooked beef stew for lunch and I ate it because I didn't want to hurt her feelings, and (2) it was an early afternoon race, in September, in Georgia. Yeah, heat and a big meal wasn't a great combo on race day. **MANDY STEPHENS HOWARD**, 42, BETHLEHEM, GEORGIA

Kenenisa Bekele, and top Americans like Bernard Lagat and Adam Goucher. The pace was hot early and I was off it quickly. Guys all around me were dropping out. By the time I hit 100 meters to go, the race was over and I was getting the dreaded pity clap. I remember thinking, *I can't believe I'm getting the pity clap.* The humiliation made me take a good look at my running abilities [in longer distances]. The following January, I ran 59:43 in the Houston Half Marathon. None of my successes would have happened if I hadn't gotten last."

SHE PAID THE LOVE FORWARD

Beth Salinger, 47, race director, Chicago. Established the "Tunnel of Love" for last-place finishers of the Hospital Hill Run.

"In August 2000, I had a gastric bypass, lost 100 pounds, and the following May, did a triathlon. I finished dead last. I was so proud of myself that I didn't care—a year prior, I couldn't run a mile. At the finish line, I had a crowd of 30 people cheering. All my Team in Training teammates were there. I felt like a total rock star. I want the last person at the Hospital Hill Run to get that same superhero finish, so we have 'heroes' that accompany our last ➜

THE *final* WORD

@BeTheRunner: 1st race (6th grade): 880y. Had to hear the announcer say: "Hold on everyone, there's still ONE MORE RUNNER on the track!"

NO PITY

IT TAKES A LOT OF COURAGE TO RUN A SUCKY RACE

By Lauren Fleshman

I'M GOING TO TELL you a story. It's about the 2012 Olympic Trials, where I finished last.

Less than 10 months earlier, I had emerged from the dark underground tunnels of the 2011 World Championships stadium to the blinding lights of a stadium filled with 66,000 spectators. My sweaty body shivered with the enormity of it. A Japanese athlete behind me cried from the stress as the women's 5000-meter field marched around the track to our starting line. I had my act together. Sure, it was scary, but I was going to fight for a medal I had no business winning, and I wasn't afraid of failing. I came away with seventh that night, pumped. I had been brave, just not strong enough yet to crack the top three. Next year, the Olympic year, I would finally have all the pieces in place at the right time. After missing out on qualifying for three Olympics, I was perfectly poised at last. Twelve months and four more people, and I win a medal: 2012 was finally going to be my year.

And then I ran the New York City Marathon in November 2011. It was dumb in retrospect, but at the time I felt invincible. I was going to do it as a training motivator, giving me a block of long tempo runs that I felt I needed for the big year ahead. It would be an experience. I could make some play money that doesn't exist in track. I'd be undertrained (for an elite) but would get to see what all the marathon fuss was about, just for fun, before diving into the Olympic year. How could I lose?

Breaking my IT band, that's how. Three weeks before the marathon.

Had I known that my IT band would take a year to heal, I would have withdrawn from the marathon, rather than race through it to a 2:37. I would have missed out on becoming friends with Paula Radcliffe and seeing Meb handle his most humbling race with grace. I might have gotten healthy faster, but sometimes you just get hurt, and it sucks for a year. But one thing is for sure, I wouldn't have gone on to have the most life-affirming race of my career at the Olympic Trials. Yes, the one where I finished last.

AS WITH MOST INJURIES I've had, I didn't think it was that serious at first. I went to see pro athlete guru Dr. John Ball near Phoenix for a week to loosen things up, and then took the month off to rejuvenate. It didn't go away.

All I could do pain-free was short sprints. I went back to Dr. Ball, who said my IT band was significantly screwed up, and came home with exercises and a glacially-slow-return-to-running plan.

It didn't go away.

Any more than two minutes of running and my knee had stabbing pain. The bike hurt. The ElliptiGo hurt. Aqua jogging hurt. The only cross-training that didn't hurt was organized drowning, otherwise known as swimming. I tried cortisone injections, acupuncture, Reiki, cursing. I patched together whatever I could do pain-free, which was a bunch of run/walk workouts adding up to no more than 15 to 20 minutes every other day. Pretty soon it was April and the Olympic Trials were two months away. Sprint, swim, sprint, swim. Ain't nobody gonna find that program recommended in a 5K training book.

I had a choice. Call it quits and save face? Or continue with the bizarre training and race the Olympic Trials anyway?

There was zero chance I was going to make the Olympic Team at this point. I was running 10 miles a *week*. The best runners in the country were running 70 miles a week or more. I had been the best before, I knew what it took, and I wasn't even close. So why did a small part of me still want to race?

Well, to start, I had earned a lane. Who knew if I'd ever qualify for the Olympic Trials again? The scientist in me couldn't help wondering, *How fast could a person run a 5K off of 10 miles a week of sprinting and a bunch of swimming?* But the other part of me was like, *NOOOO! FLEEE! All people care about in pro sport is winning. You've fallen so far, you'll look like a fool.*

But one thing kept coming back to me: The Journey. That cheesy stuff of Instagram posts and refrigerator magnets. I had been preaching, writing, and speaking to anyone who would listen that the reason we set big goals isn't to achieve them but to set ourselves on a road trip toward them, and that trip is where all the good living is. And now I was about to light my campervan on fire and walk away?

So it was decided. I asked my hard-ass British coach if he would be interested in creating the most unusual 5K training plan ever, and he said "Of course, luv. Of course." That's not to say there weren't several moments where I freaking lost it. Moments where I walked away from a disastrous track workout feeling humiliated and insane. Moments where I lay in bed staring at the ceiling in the dark, crying and feeling betrayed by fate. But most of those moments were because I was afraid of failing in a very public way. I was feeling sorry for myself in advance because I believed shame was coming.

Those moments were awful, but they reinforced that I absolutely had to do it. I would think, *This is the very thing that holds people back from trying things. From having experiences. This fear that failing makes you a failure.* In our core, we want to believe that trying matters, regardless of the outcome. That having the courage to see things through to their mysterious ends is worthwhile. That fighting well with what you have is enough.

THE NIGHT BEFORE my Olympic Trials 5K prelim race in June in Eugene, Oregon, I was having second thoughts, and as is my custom in trepidatious times, I wrote a blog. I explained my situation, setting the expectations for my fans to let them know that even though they were used to seeing me fight for the podium, just qualifying for the final of the 5K would be a massive accomplishment this time around, and even that was a reach. I told them that I was running because I believed having the courage to try when you're less than your best is important, and if people agreed, to hold up a "C" from the stands when I came out for my race, and I'd give them a wink.

As soon as I hit "publish" I thought, *Oh God, that's so cheesy, nobody is going to do that. You've really lost it.* But it was 11, and I figured nobody would see it.

As the official led us toward the track in a neat line organized by lane number, I wasn't scared. I wasn't nervous. I had one job: Do my best. Nobody else mattered. It dawned on me, ironically, that this exact attitude would have made me unbeatable right now if only I had the fitness behind me. Note to self for next time.

We walked through the side gate and began the customary 200-meter walk in lane eight toward the 5000 meter start; I took a deep breath and consciously relaxed my shoulders as the sight of the crowd raised the tempo of my heart. Someone yelled my name from the bleachers. A group of people were wearing Picky Bars T-shirts and cupping their hands into a C. My heart beat even faster, and I waved. As we made our way along the fence, more and more people held up their hands. Friends from town; a team of women I met the day before from Seattle wearing fan shirts; a group of kids from a running camp; random individuals coming to their feet. They weren't yelling, they were simply standing in solidarity, and I filled up so full I began to spill over. On the starting line I held up my hand.

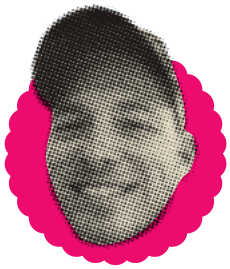
I made the final in a tactical race that day, in a sprint finish, fittingly. When I charged into sixth place, every muscle straining with a distance now foreign to me, the crowd roared as if I had won.

We set big goals not to achieve them, but to set ourselves on a road trip toward them. That's where the good living is.

Three days later, I would race again in the final, where three women would become Olympians. I would not be one of them. I knew it in my heart and in my aching body, still in physical shock from the incredible ask a few days ago. I was not a trained machine like these other women. Not this time. I ran with lead legs and an empty tank, but I never once felt alone. My people were in the stands again, in force. Even when the pack broke me with a mile to go, and I drifted back into last place, I powered on, with a full-body grimace. Ghosts of old mind-sets floated around me, begging me to save face, and I battled with myself. Half a lap behind, I knew winning for me today meant finishing, and my silent tears mixed with sweat at the cruelty and beauty of it. With 200 meters to go, I was the only one still running, the other athletes long finished and clustered together in a different bouquet of emotions. And that's when the clapping started. *So this is what a "pity clap" feels like,* I thought, as my body clambered along ungracefully toward the finish, which finally I crossed with a mixture of relief and gratitude. But I didn't hear pity in the sound, and I never will again.

Lauren Fleshman is a pro runner with Oiselle, cofounder of Picky Bars, and coauthor of the recently published *Believe Training Journal* (Velo Press). For more, go to runnersworld.com/laurenfleshman.

finisher in. Heroes carry cell phones so we know who the runner is, his or her story, and when he or she will approach the finish line. When I get the call, I tell all the volunteers, spectators, and participants, 'We're putting together the Tunnel of Love, please make your way down here.' Not one sign or banner can be taken down. When he or she comes in, it's like this puddle of love. One year, our final finisher was a gal who had started out by walking our 5K when she weighed 300 pounds. She got a medal, thought, *Wow this is cool,* and the next year she signed up for the 10K. The next year she did the half. When she came through the finish with our hero, we were all bawling."



HE HAD A CHANGE OF HEART

Staff Sergeant John Brittain, 35, U.S. Army National Guard recruiter, Indianapolis, Indiana. Driving a sweep vehicle gave him a new perspective on why people run.

"I was driving an open-air vehicle for the 2013 Carmel Marathon [in Indiana]. About mile 19, I came upon a woman who looked really tired. I was about to tell her to move to the sidewalk when something told me to leave her alone. Her family and friends were holding signs and when she'd pass, they'd run up, put their arms around her, walk with her a bit. It was so cold and so miserable, but I just followed her in. As she crossed the finish, she pointed to the heavens. Part of me was thinking, *Oh, thank God, that's over.* She turned around and called me over and said, 'Thank you so much for letting me finish. I'm a recent cancer survivor and my dream was to finish this race.' I get goose bumps just thinking about it. She just kept saying, 'Thank you, thank you.' I'm a runner myself, and I used to be kind of judgmental. I'd see people running and think, *Man, that person really needs to pick up the pace.* Now I think, *That's awesome, good for them.*"

THE *final* WORD

VIA FACEBOOK I was 11 and ran my first 10K in Mammoth Lakes. The race was sponsored by McDonald's and ended at the restaurant. I was dead last. About a quarter mile from the finish, Ronald McDonald came slapping up in those big shoes. He ran me in to the finish, with everyone watching and clapping. I was mortified. He turned to shake my hand, and I leaned over and puked on those big shoes. But I won the women's under-13 division because I was the only one!
SARA LABATT, 40, ALAMEDA, CALIFORNIA

NOTABLE NUMBERS

By (way) back-of-the-packers

3:48:42 Slowest recorded women's Olympic marathon time Set by Otgonbayar Luvsanlundeg of Mongolia at the 2004 Olympics in Athens. Luvsanlundeg has since competed in several world championships and the London Olympics in 2012 (and set her PR of 2:39:50 in 2011).

4:24:17 Slowest recorded men's Olympic marathon time Abdul Baser Wasiqi of Afghanistan had a 2:30 PR coming into the 1996 Atlanta Games, but injured his hamstring before the event. When he reached the finish, volunteers were setting up the closing ceremonies.

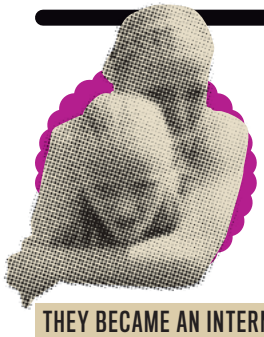
37:15:00 Slowest marathon by a woman It took Zoe Koplowitz, who has multiple sclerosis, over a day and a half to complete the 2013 New York City Marathon on her crutches.

26 days Slowest marathon by a man Englishman Lloyd Scott, then a fundraiser for a children's charity, crawled the London Marathon course in 2011 dressed as a giant snail to raise money.

54 years Most delayed finish...ever Shizo Kanakuri of Japan nearly overheated in the 1912 Olympic Marathon in Stockholm, Sweden. After the 30K mark, he dropped out. Officials weren't notified, and he became known as "the missing marathoner." After a journalist found him in 1967, the Swedish National Olympic Committee invited Kanakuri, then 76, to finish—he ran from the final turn into the stadium. His official time? 54 years, 8 months, 6 days, 5 hours, 32 minutes, and 20.3 seconds.

THE *final* WORD

VIA FACEBOOK In my first 10K, I was DFL! The funny thing was that I wore a shirt that said, "Don't be last" on the back. The local law enforcement agency was behind me. After the race, the cop found me, and said he had to find me because of my shirt! **CHRISTINE KELLNER LINDBLAD**, 50, BOCA RATON, FLORIDA



THEY BECAME AN INTERNET SENSATION

Claire and Chloe Gruenke, 14, New Baden, Illinois. After Chloe collapsed in the 800 meters at the state middle-school championships, Claire carried her twin on her back for 350 meters to the finish. The May 2014 photos of them went viral.

Chloe: "On the back straightaway of the first lap I felt something in my leg move or pop. About 50 meters into the second lap, I went down. Claire came up to me and said, 'You have to finish this.'"

Claire: "I just kind of acted in the moment. The 800 was the only race Chloe went to states in. It was her race; I really wanted her to finish. She'd been working the whole track season, since like February, for that race. I put her on my back and at first I ran, but then I realized I couldn't really do that. At one point I was like, *Am I really going to be able to finish this?*"

Chloe: "She set me down in front of the line and we finished together."

THE *final* WORD

@FoFo_foShoSho: I was 2nd to last in a race, and the coach of the girl behind me shouted, "Just drop out, you're losing." She did just that, and I lost!

HE MADE HIS COUNTRY PROUD

John Stephen Akhwari, 77, farmer and former Olympic marathoner, Tanzania. Despite a disastrous day on the world's biggest stage, he refused to give up.

"When I arrived in Mexico City for the 1968 Olympics, I was afraid of nothing. But I wasn't prepared for the altitude; my country had sent me to train at sea level in Dar es Salaam [in Tanzania]. I was leading until the 30K mark, when I suddenly felt dizzy. I fell and blacked out. I have no idea how much time I lost. When I woke up, the medical team was treating me. They asked me to get in an ambulance, but I refused—I just started running and walking. I was in a lot of pain and was bleeding; I had injured both knees and torn several tendons. But I did not care; my main mission was to finish. I finished in 3:25:27. I spent the next two weeks being treated for altitude sickness. When I'd left for Mexico, I'd told everyone my mission was to do well for my country, Tanzania, no matter what. I kept that promise."

HE KEEPS ON RUNNING

Harrison Hensley, 82, retired, Pinckney, Michigan. To all you would-be weenies, he'd like you to know: Coming in last is a win.

"Someone's gotta be last. [Being last] doesn't bother me a bit. Eventually, everyone slows down. I think those guys who quit instead of dealing with getting slower are weenies. That's what I call them. I'll sacrifice my race if I see someone struggling, I'll slow down and we'll run together. Not so much with men—they're macho and don't appreciate it—but I'll slow down and help women if I see them struggling. Everybody needs help sometimes to get through it, and I don't look down at anyone who shows up for a race. I'll be 83 in August. I'm vertical, I'm ambulatory, my peepers are open, so I'd say I'm on top of the pile. If I have to stop running, I'll do what I hate doing: walk. But I won't quit." RW

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA RAPP (GRUENKE TWINS); QI HENG/XINHUA PRESS/CORBIS (AKHWARI); ALEX SLITZ/MLIVE.COM/LANDOV (HENSLEY)