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The Fun-Run Phenomenon

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Florence. Sunday. Late morning. Misty. Charming. Autumnal. Peaceful. Gently tolling. Gently cobbled.

Then the spell was broken. Around a corner, there came a stamping tidal wave. If not for carefully positioned coloured tapes, we would have been buffeted by the tired horde. Hundreds of amateur men and women panted past -- a jumble of perspiring and exhausted humankind. Super-fit pounding ones, unfit puffing ones, pretty ones, ugly ones, tall and then tiny ones. All, beneath blazing t-shirt colours, had race numbers on their gasping chests. Some had balloons attached to their shoulders, to attract even more attention, presumably.

I know little or nothing about this kind of event. But almost everyone appeared to me to be in severe distress. It was as though they were a pack of previously tipped-off but still doomed lemmings now kept together solely by peer pressure.

Fuelled with a dark Italian cappuchino, and with time to kill before a lecture, I was happy to stand and watch. It seemed to me, after a while in the cool sunshine, that here was one of the most interesting sociological phenomena of our time. What explains it?

The London Marathon of 2005 will run in early Spring. And it appears you can still apply to be in it (in order to win it, as the rhyme goes). The first of these races was in 1981. In that year, I discovered, after a bit of research, 7000 people took part. This year the number will be nearly 100,000 runners. If religion had this kind of weekend appeal, our churches would be bursting.

Why on earth do people do this and what does it tell us about ourselves?

First, the social scientist in me might conjecture that this is simply part of our modern concern with health and exercise. I run, might come the argument, because it is known that doing so improves my chance of a long life, and it is only in the last few decades that there has been scientific evidence for the benefits of running. This sounds rational. But I don't believe it.

When you watch a marathon, you appear to see people having a terrible time, in a humiliating setting. Somebody who desires fitness can achieve it quietly and out of sight.

Second, maybe people are competing against themselves in some way? That would fit in with the fact that lots of runners looked at watches, I noticed, as they stumbled by. Yet, once again, that is unpersuasive. If you want to teach yourself to run faster, or over ever-longer distances, you do not have to do so on in front of thousands of spectators.

Third, could it be that this is just a new form of social activity? Perhaps the rise of television has so depleted our ability to communicate that we now would rather run together than talk together? Again that does not make sense. Pubs are still popular.

Fourth, it is just for charity, some could say. I cannot buy that view either. Donations do not have to be made in a running shirt.

I believe the fun-run marathon is a cover for baser motives. It is about the search for status in a society where folk are no longer allowed to fight. People take part in amateur marathons because they enjoy the extra social rank it gives them. They go through the pain for a sound, but subconscious, reason. And this is why the running has to be in public.

As they staggered past me, those Florentine runners were subconsciously thinking: Hah, I am a tougher and better person than that funny man in a hat.