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‘An inspirational read’ *Sunday Business Post*

‘A terrific ride, recommended for any athlete.’ Kirkus

‘The *best* book on running I’ve ever read’ Shankara Smith, manager,  
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‘This is, quite simply, the best book on sport I have ever read. It is  
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whether you are interested in long-distance running or not, is so  
compelling and so unusual you will happily forsake meals and  
friendships just so you can read another page.’ *Sydney Morning  
Herald*

‘A fascinating meditation on man’s urge to run.’ *Men’s Health*

‘Startlingly candid’ *Outdoor Australia*

‘Inspirational’ *Readers Digest*

# BORN TO RUN

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THE HIDDEN TRIBE, THE ULTRA-RUNNERS,

---

AND THE GREATEST RACE

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THE WORLD HAS NEVER SEEN

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Christopher McDougall

**P**  
PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2010

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by

PROFILE BOOKS LTD

3A Exmouth House

Pine Street

London EC1R 0JH

*www.profilebooks.com*

First published in the United States in 2009 by  
Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., New York

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Bookmarque, Croydon, Surrey

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library.

ISBN 978 1 86197 877 6

ISBN 978 1 84668 422 7 (Australian edition)

eISBN 978 1 84765 228 7



**Mixed Sources**

Product group from well-managed  
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[www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org) Cert no. TF-COC-002227  
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*To John and Jean McDougall,*

*my parents,*

*who gave me everything*

*and keep on giving*



The best runner leaves no tracks.

—*Tao Te Ching*





# **BORN TO RUN**



## CHAPTER 1



To live with ghosts requires solitude.

—ANNE MICHAELS, *Fugitive Pieces*

FOR DAYS, I'd been searching Mexico's Sierra Madre for the phantom known as *Caballo Blanco*—the White Horse. I'd finally arrived at the end of the trail, in the last place I expected to find him—not deep in the wilderness he was said to haunt, but in the dim lobby of an old hotel on the edge of a dusty desert town.

“*Sí, El Caballo está,*” the desk clerk said, nodding. Yes, the Horse is here.

“For real?” After hearing that I'd *just* missed him so many times, in so many bizarre locations, I'd begun to suspect that Caballo Blanco was nothing more than a fairy tale, a local Loch Ness *monstruo* dreamed up to spook the kids and fool gullible gringos.

“He's always back by five,” the clerk added. “It's like a ritual.”

I didn't know whether to hug her in relief or high-five her in triumph. I checked my watch. That meant I'd actually lay eyes on the ghost in less than . . . hang on.

“But it's already after six.”

The clerk shrugged. “Maybe he's gone away.”

I sagged into an ancient sofa. I was filthy, famished, and defeated. I was exhausted, and so were my leads.

Some said Caballo Blanco was a fugitive; others heard he was a boxer who'd run off to punish himself after beating a man to death in the ring. No one knew his name, or age, or where he was from. He

was like some Old West gunslinger whose only traces were tall tales and a whiff of cigarillo smoke. Descriptions and sightings were all over the map; villagers who lived impossible distances apart swore they'd seen him traveling on foot on the same day, and described him on a scale that swung wildly from "funny and *simpático*" to "freaky and gigantic."

But in all versions of the Caballo Blanco legend, certain basic details were always the same: He'd come to Mexico years ago and trekked deep into the wild, impenetrable Barrancas del Cobre—the Copper Canyons—to live among the Tarahumara, a near-mythical tribe of Stone Age superathletes. The Tarahumara (pronounced Spanish-style by swallowing the "h": Tara-oo-mara) may be the healthiest and most serene people on earth, and the greatest runners of all time.

When it comes to ultradistances, nothing can beat a Tarahumara runner—not a racehorse, not a cheetah, not an Olympic marathoner. Very few outsiders have ever seen the Tarahumara in action, but amazing stories of their superhuman toughness and tranquillity have drifted out of the canyons for centuries. One explorer swore he saw a Tarahumara catch a deer with his bare hands, chasing the bounding animal until it finally dropped dead from exhaustion, "its hoofs falling off." Another adventurer spent ten hours climbing up and over a Copper Canyon mountain by mule; a Tarahumara runner made the same trip in ninety minutes.

"Try this," a Tarahumara woman once told an exhausted explorer who'd collapsed at the base of a mountain. She handed him a gourd full of a murky liquid. He swallowed a few gulps, and was amazed to feel new energy pulsing in his veins. He got to his feet and scaled the peak like an overcaffeinated Sherpa. The Tarahumara, the explorer would later report, also guarded the recipe to a special energy food that leaves them trim, powerful, and unstoppable: a few mouthfuls packed enough nutritional punch to let them run all day without rest.

But whatever secrets the Tarahumara are hiding, they've hidden them well. To this day, the Tarahumara live in the side of cliffs higher than a hawk's nest in a land few have ever seen. The Barrancas are a lost world in the most remote wilderness in North America, a sort of a shorebound Bermuda Triangle known for swallowing the misfits

and desperadoes who stray inside. Lots of bad things can happen down there, and probably will; survive the man-eating jaguars, deadly snakes, and blistering heat, and you've still got to deal with "canyon fever," a potentially fatal freak-out brought on by the Barrancas' desolate eeriness. The deeper you penetrate into the Barrancas, the more it feels like a crypt sliding shut around you. The walls tighten, shadows spread, phantom echoes whisper; every route out seems to end in sheer rock. Lost prospectors would be gripped by such madness and despair, they'd slash their own throats or hurl themselves off cliffs. Little surprise that few strangers have ever seen the Tarahumara's homeland—let alone the Tarahumara.

But somehow the White Horse had made his way to the depths of the Barrancas. And there, it's said, he was adopted by the Tarahumara as a friend and kindred spirit; a ghost among ghosts. He'd certainly mastered two Tarahumara skills—invisibility and extraordinary endurance—because even though he was spotted all over the canyons, no one seemed to know where he lived or when he might appear next. If anyone could translate the ancient secrets of the Tarahumara, I was told, it was this lone wanderer of the High Sierras.

I'd become so obsessed with finding Caballo Blanco that as I dozed on the hotel sofa, I could even imagine the sound of his voice. "Probably like Yogi Bear ordering burritos at Taco Bell," I mused. A guy like that, a wanderer who'd go anywhere but fit in nowhere, must live inside his own head and rarely hear his own voice. He'd make weird jokes and crack himself up. He'd have a booming laugh and atrocious Spanish. He'd be loud and chatty and . . . and . . .

Wait. I *was* hearing him. My eyes popped open to see a dusty cadaver in a tattered straw hat bantering with the desk clerk. Trail dust streaked his gaunt face like fading war paint, and the shocks of sun-bleached hair sticking out from under the hat could have been trimmed with a hunting knife. He looked like a castaway on a desert island, even to the way he seemed hungry for conversation with the bored clerk.

"Caballo?" I croaked.

The cadaver turned, smiling, and I felt like an idiot. He didn't look wary; he looked confused, as any tourist would when confronted by a deranged man on a sofa suddenly hollering "Horse!"

This wasn't Caballo. There was no Caballo. The whole thing was a hoax, and I'd fallen for it.

Then the cadaver spoke. "You know me?"

"Man!" I exploded, scrambling to my feet. "Am I glad to see you!"

The smile vanished. The cadaver's eyes darted toward the door, making it clear that in another second, he would as well.



## CHAPTER 2



IT ALL BEGAN with a simple question that no one could answer.

It was a five-word puzzle that led me to a photo of a very fast man in a very short skirt, and from there it only got stranger. Soon, I was dealing with a murder, drug guerrillas, and a one-armed man with a cream-cheese cup strapped to his head. I met a beautiful blonde forest ranger who slipped out of her clothes and found salvation by running naked in the Idaho forests, and a young surfer babe in pigtails who ran straight toward her death in the desert. A talented young runner would die. Two others would barely escape with their lives.

I kept looking, and stumbled across the Barefoot Batman . . . Naked Guy . . . Kalahari Bushmen . . . the Toenail Amputee . . . a cult devoted to distance running and sex parties . . . the Wild Man of the Blue Ridge Mountains . . . and, ultimately, the ancient tribe of the Tarahumara and their shadowy disciple, Caballo Blanco.

In the end, I got my answer, but only after I found myself in the middle of the greatest race the world would never see: the Ultimate Fighting Competition of footraces, an underground showdown pitting some of the best ultradistance runners of our time against the best ultrarunners of *all* time, in a fifty-mile race on hidden trails only Tarahumara feet had ever touched. I'd be startled to discover that the ancient saying of the *Tao Tè Ching*—"The best runner leaves no tracks"—wasn't some gossamer koan, but real, concrete, how-to, training advice.

And all because in January 2001 I asked my doctor this:  
“How come my foot hurts?”

I’d gone to see one of the top sports-medicine specialists in the country because an invisible ice pick was driving straight up through the sole of my foot. The week before, I’d been out for an easy three-mile jog on a snowy farm road when I suddenly whinnied in pain, grabbing my right foot and screaming curses as I toppled over in the snow. When I got a grip on myself, I checked to see how badly I was bleeding. I must have impaled my foot on a sharp rock, I figured, or an old nail wedged in the ice. But there wasn’t a drop of blood, or even a hole in my shoe.

“Running is your problem,” Dr. Joe Torg confirmed when I limped into his Philadelphia examining room a few days later. He should know; Dr. Torg had not only helped create the entire field of sports medicine, but he also co-wrote *The Running Athlete*, the definitive radiographic analysis of every conceivable running injury. He ran me through an X-ray and watched me hobble around, then determined that I’d aggravated my cuboid, a cluster of bones parallel to the arch that I hadn’t even known existed until it reengineered itself into an internal Taser.

“But I’m barely running at all,” I said. “I’m doing, like, two or three miles every other day. And not even on asphalt. Mostly dirt roads.”

Didn’t matter. “The human body is not designed for that kind of abuse,” Dr. Torg replied. “Especially not *your* body.”

I knew exactly what he meant. At six feet four inches and two hundred thirty pounds, I’d been told many times that nature intended guys my size to post up under the hoop or take a bullet for the President, not pound our bulk down the pavement. And since I’d turned forty, I was starting to see why; in the five years since I’d stopped playing pickup hoops and tried turning myself into a marathoner, I’d ripped my hamstring (twice), strained my Achilles tendons (repeatedly), sprained my ankles (both, alternately), suffered aching arches (regularly), and had to walk down stairs backward on tiptoe because my heels were so sore. And now, apparently, the last docile spot on my feet had joined the rebellion.

The weird thing was, I seemed to be otherwise unbreakable. As a



writer for *Men's Health* magazine and one of *Esquire* magazine's original "Restless Man" columnists, a big part of my job was experimenting with semi-extreme sports. I'd ridden Class IV rapids on a boogie board, surfed giant sand dunes on a snowboard, and mountain biked across the North Dakota Badlands. I'd also reported from three war zones for the Associated Press and spent months in some of the most lawless regions of Africa, all without a nick or a twinge. But jog a few miles down the street, and suddenly I'm rolling on the ground like I'd been gut shot in a drive-by.

Take any other sport, and an injury rate like mine would classify me as defective. In running, it makes me normal. The real mutants are the runners who *don't* get injured. Up to eight out of every ten runners are hurt *every year*. It doesn't matter if you're heavy or thin, speedy or slow, a marathon champ or a weekend huffer, you're just as likely as the other guy to savage your knees, shins, hamstrings, hips, or heels. Next time you line up for a Turkey Trot, look at the runners on your right and left: statistically, only one of you will be back for the Jingle Bell Jog.

No invention yet has slowed the carnage; you can now buy running shoes that have steel bedsprings embedded in the soles or that adjust their cushioning by microchip, but the injury rate hasn't decreased a jot in thirty years. If anything, it's actually ebbed up; Achilles tendon blowouts have seen a 10 percent increase. Running seemed to be the fitness version of drunk driving: you could get away with it for a while, you might even have some fun, but catastrophe was waiting right around the corner.

"Big surprise," the sports-medicine literature sneers. Not exactly like that, though. More like this: "Athletes whose sport involves running put enormous strain on their legs." That's what the *Sports Injury Bulletin* has declared. "Each footfall hits one of their legs with a force equal to more than twice their body weight. Just as repeated hammering on an apparently impenetrable rock will eventually reduce the stone to dust, the impact loads associated with running can ultimately break down your bones, cartilage, muscles, tendons, and ligaments." A report by the American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons concluded that distance running is "an outrageous threat to the integrity of the knee."

And instead of "impenetrable rock," that outrage is banging down

on one of the most sensitive points in your body. You know what kind of nerves are in your feet? The same ones that network into your genitals. Your feet are like a minnow bucket full of sensory neurons, all of them wriggling around in search of sensation. Stimulate those nerves just a little, and the impulse will rocket through your entire nervous system; that's why tickling your feet can overload the switchboard and cause your whole body to spasm.

No wonder South American dictators had a foot fetish when it came to breaking hard cases; the *bastinado*, the technique of tying victims down and beating the soles of their feet, was developed by the Spanish Inquisition and eagerly adopted by the world's sickest sadists. The Khmer Rouge and Saddam Hussein's sinister son Uday were big-time *bastinado* fans because they knew their anatomy; only the face and hands compare with the feet for instant-messaging capability to the brain. When it comes to sensing the softest caress or tiniest grain of sand, your toes are as finely wired as your lips and fingertips.

"So isn't there anything I can do?" I asked Dr. Torg.

He shrugged. "You can keep running, but you'll be back for more of these," he said, giving a little *ting* with his fingernail to the giant needle full of cortisone he was about to push into the bottom of my foot. I'd also need custom-made orthotics (\$400) to slip inside my motion-control running shoes (\$150 and climbing, and since I'd need to rotate two pairs, make it \$300). But that would just postpone the real big-ticket item: my inevitable next visit to his waiting room.

"Know what I'd recommend?" Dr. Torg concluded. "Buy a bike."

I thanked him, promised I'd take his advice, then immediately went behind his back to someone else. Doc Torg was getting up in years, I realized; maybe he'd gotten a little too conservative with his advice and a little too quick with his cortisone. A physician friend recommended a sports podiatrist who was also a marathoner, so I made an appointment for the following week.

The podiatrist took another X-ray, then probed my foot with his thumbs. "Looks like you've got cuboid syndrome," he concluded. "I can blast the inflammation out with some cortisone, but then you're going to need orthotics."

"Damn," I muttered. "That's just what Torg said."