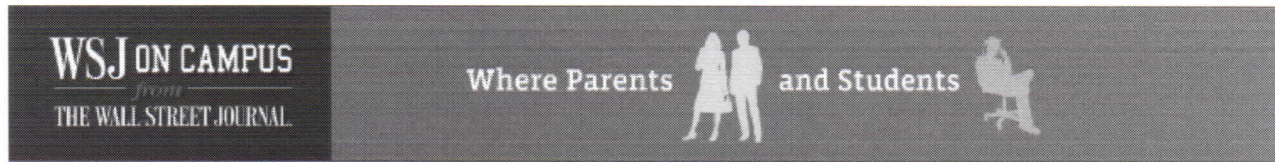


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Interlopers Run Amok: Guys Crash Road Races for Women

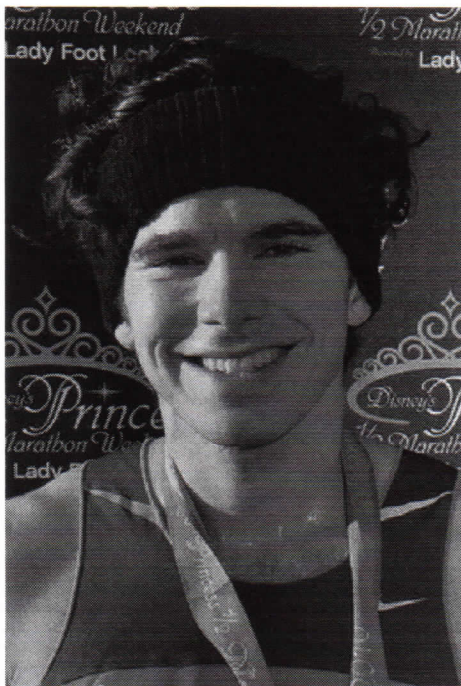
They Come in First, Are Dissed at Finish; For Meeting Fit Females, 'It's Hard to Beat'

By KEVIN HELLIKER

Jonathan Mederos set a personal record in Disney's Princess Half Marathon last year, winning first place with a time of 1:16:17.

The reception he got was far from his personal best, though. "When I crossed the finish line, the announcers were silent, and I got downcast looks from the crowd," says Mr. Mederos, a 25-year-old high-school philosophy teacher in Miami.

That's what a guy gets for winning a women's race. As Rick Cordes took last year's Nike Women's Half Marathon, he slunk across the finish line, with a finger pressed to his lips, beseeching silence after having been heckled throughout the race.



Jonathan Mederos

ASI Photo

"Maybe I shouldn't have been so competitive in a race that I would have been slaughtered in if it were an all-men's field," says Mr. Cordes, a 48-year-old California real-estate broker, in an email. He was one of nearly 700 men among more than 12,700 women in the Nike Half Marathon.

This year, at least a dozen races styled for women are having their debuts across America, from the Nashville Women's Half Marathon on Sept. 25, to Long Island's Divas Half Marathon a week later.

The growth results from an explosion in the number of female runners, who last year accounted for 53% of all U.S. road-race finishers, according to the research center Running USA.

"You take out the testosterone and these events are kinder, cleaner, gentler and sweeter," says Robert Pozo, who runs a group of women's races from a website called Run Like a Diva.

Men can register for these races, as footnotes on the event websites note. Technically allowing guys to run avoids legal spats, pleases charity sponsors whose fund-raisers are often male and engenders a magnanimous spirit. But these races tolerate rather than welcome male participants.

The growing acceptance of men at women's races represents a sort of reverse Title IX, the federal law that opened the doors for women to compete in many sports. But men aren't exactly jumping at the chance, even at women's races that actively encourage male participation, such as the Nike Women's Half Marathon. Brook Gardner, an Oregon sports journalist, went to San Francisco last year to cover the race, and at the urging of Nike officials agreed to run it. As it turned out, he heard constant cries of "go, girl!" and at the finish line received a tiffany necklace from a man wearing a tuxedo. "I felt a little awkward," says Mr. Gardner.



ASI Photo

Jonathan Mederos races in Disney's Princess Half Marathon—for women.

"We suggest men only do the race in support of a woman or charity," says the website of this week's Nashville Women's Half Marathon. "If he is looking to win a race, get an award or [set a personal record], we would be happy to suggest some other events in the local area that would be better suited for those goals."

To discourage male interest, many women's races present trophies only to female winners. Goodie bags often contain feminine-cut T-shirts, along with swag like perfume samples, chocolates and pink sandals. One race is giving away feather boas and tiaras.

Ahead of its Oct. 2 inaugural half marathon, Run Like a Diva announced that finishers' medals will be awarded by bare-chested male firefighters. "We had four men signed up, but two dropped out when they heard about the firemen," says Mr. Pozo, the race organizer. "We're making this race so girly that men won't want any part of it."

While male participation in the Nike Half Marathon has risen steadily over the years, the number of men running Disney's Princess Half Marathon jumped to 423 this year from 196 in the debut. Men remained vastly outnumbered, with nearly 11,000 women running this year.

Some men run at the behest of girlfriends and wives. Mr. Mederos, unheralded winner of last year's Disney race, says he ran as a "prince" for his girlfriend, not to show up females.

Other men see a target-rich environment. "If you want to meet fit young women, it's hard to beat," says Maj. Christopher Sopko, a 31-year-old pilot in the Ohio Air National Guard.

Although men are loath to admit it, one appeal women's races have for them is the shot at a better finish. Men who ran in the middle of a pack of guys can finish near the top of a field teeming with women.

Mr. Cordes had never won a heavily attended race before taking first place in last year's Nike Women's Half Marathon. (He ran it, he says, because his wife, coach of a Nike running club, encouraged him.)

Although the Disney race's website says the half marathon is officially designed "for a princess earning her glass running slippers or a woman who runs her kingdom already," Rick Gausche found this year's event a fine ego-booster. The 29-year-old process-design consultant ranked fourth among men and eighth overall. "I've never passed so many women in my life," he says.

Some races take steps to ensure that a female crosses the finish line first—whether she has the fastest time or not.

After Mr. Mederos won last year's Disney race debut, organizers decided that this year, only women would be allowed in the first corral of runners, giving them an advantage of several minutes over men. Though a 41-year-old Canadian male posted the fastest time, a 33-year-old North Dakota woman crossed the finish line first.

Not that all women need a head start. At last November's St. Petersburg Women's Half Marathon in Florida, a 23-year-old medical student named Clayton Hofstra stood at the start recalling what a junior-high-school cross-country coach had told him: "Never let a girl beat you."

But standing nearby was Christa Benton, an older graduate of his high school who had dominated long-distance running. Sure enough, Ms. Benton finished first, followed by three other women.

Still proud of finishing 13th overall and fifth among the 138 men, Mr. Hofstra tried wearing his pink T-shirt to class the next day, only to find it was too tight. "I guess I hadn't realized that the shirts came in women's sizes," he says.

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