

Running slow

A quest for 1000 marathons

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Hajime Nishi plans to live to be a centenarian, but he's pacing himself to get there—through 1,000 different marathons, that is. The Grand Teton Races last weekend, makes number 621, but he's not in any hurry.

After having made the Guinness Book of World Records in 1997 for "The fastest time to run a marathon on each of seven continents" (a category his feat created) and then getting a nod from the Wall Street Journal as "One of the Most Accomplished Runners," he had a change of heart. Now the more than fit 61-year-old tries to beat the clock in another way. Mostly he just ignores it.

"Sometimes people are saying, are you running backward?" he said the day before the race.

If he runs backward, it would be in order to take a snap shot of a flower or pick up a piece of trash he saw lying along the race course.

"We need to consider our lifestyle fundamentally," Nishi said.

The roots of Nishi's unique running style go back thirty years, when his wife died of cancer at the age of 38 leaving him the single father of three small children. It was 1990 and Nishi was 41 years old.

"At that time, I was very confused," he said. "My business was good but my heart was empty."

He had a successful enterprise going in bringing the latest American movies to Japan. Every two weeks he would fly to California, watch the newest

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blockbusters, write a review for his magazine, and then return to Japan with a license to import the films. He also started to visit the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif., a retreat center for alternative education. He realized that the knowledge he had acquired as a graphic designer, architect, and businessman didn't reach the level he needed.

"I wanted something concrete," he said. "I didn't know nothing about my life or the meaning of my life."

His visits to Esalen started him on a spiritual quest. At about the same time, he read an article about the Honolulu Marathon in a Japanese magazine and decided to go. After that he just kept running.

"I found it a recovery from the saddest thing in my life," he said.

The two new strains of his life—spiritual discovery and physical exercise—came together in 1995 when he had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to run in a relay in the Navajo Tribal Park. The race consisted of a 25-mile course that runners had to complete twice. Any runner lapped by the leader was disqualified from running the second round. This was Nishi's second visit to the place he calls one of the most spiritual spots in America, but this time, Nishi learned to see beyond the finish line and the stopwatch.

The amount of money raised for the Navajo people in the form of entry fees and tee shirt sales astonished Nishi, as did the hospitality of his hosts. However, something else also caught his eye—all the trash lying on the ground in a holy land. So he stuffed his hip pack with trash bags and also took pictures of the piles of trash he collected. While he was preoccupied with trash, the first runner lapped him. But that day, Nishi won joy.



Hajime Nishi

He has never run for time since then.

It's 9 a.m. on race day. The marathon officially started an hour ago. Nishi jogs down to base camp, a lone runner separated from the pack.

"Did you start at 5:30?" Damien Stoy one of the race organizers from Dreamchasers in Driggs asked Nishi.

"Ya," he replied only slightly out of breath as he browses the snack table, "I like to have time to take a picture."

He is smiling and has the look about him of being refreshed by the mountain air. He finished the race in 10 hours, five minutes and 24 seconds.

"A respectable time for such a challenging course especially when stopping to smell the roses pretty often,"

said Stoy.

"Reebok says 'Life is short play hard.' Nishi explained. "My idea is 'Life is long, enjoy it.'"

Instead of narrowing his vision toward the finish line and creating a visual channel of speed for his feet, he uses running to expand his mind.

"I enjoy myself with an open mind," he said.

But, Nishi's vision goes beyond finding happiness in his personal life. He wants to leave a footprint of peace and beauty for the future generations that will reside on his "home called planet earth."

"Running is so simple," he said. "All you need is fresh air and clean water to enjoy running and nature. This is the fundamental problem of our civilization under the name of progress."

The damage that fast paced, driven, modern lifestyles do to the earth concerns him. That's why he doesn't play golf, for example. He thinks about the chemicals that go into creating the better-than-real-life grass on a course in a Utah desert as well as the petroleum required to drive the

world's golfers through numerous sets of eighteen holes.

But he also recognizes that even running can have a negative environmental impact.

He recalled running a marathon in Antarctica. The course took runners over moss—perhaps common almost everywhere else, but precious and rare in the frozen environment. Nishi ran around the spots of green.

He practices his philosophy in a marathon he organizes in Tokyo.

Called Zero Emission and Slow Runner-Friendly ECOMARATHON INBA, 100 percent of the entry fees go to relief for people suffering from Japan's latest earthquake. Nishi also has his own set of rules: anyone who arrives at the race in a car is disqualified and so is the first one to cross the finish line. All competitors carry bags to pick up trash and no paper cups are provided or allowed, all runners must either bring a water bottle or a camel back to refill at the water stations. A smile will give a runner a competitive edge. Awards are also given out for the largest amounts of trash collected. Runners may start at any time they want in order to finish the race by the end time. The 150 runners in the inaugural event in 2011 picked up approximately 75 pounds of trash and raised 1,700,000 Japanese yen for earthquake victims.

It's about the joy of being, according to Nishi.

"Enjoy that you are your own jewel and nobody should compare themselves with another jewel."

TVN en Español

Hajime Nishi de Japón estableció un récord mundial como el primer hombre en correr una maratón en cada uno de los siete continentes en tan sólo siete meses. Ahora está realizando una meta nueva—correr 1,000 maratones distintos. Su participación en el Grand Teton Races el sábado pasado marcó maratón 621. Pero él tiene su propia filosofía como un corredor. No corre para ser primero sino para ser último. Empecé el maratón sábado a las 5:30 a.m. para que tuviera tiempo para tomar fotos sin apuro. "Reebok dice 'la vida es corta juega con fuerza', pero yo digo 'la vida es larga disfrute de ella.'