RUNNER'S WORLD

Running with the Amish

Pennsylvania's old order Anabaptists famously eschew modern conveniences, extolling the virtues of hard work and self-reliance. That turns out to be a great way to produce incredibly strong runners—as long as the elders approve.

By Bart Yasso with Steve Friedman

PUBLISHED 02/27/2012

Every autumn for as many years as I can remember, I have made a trip to Pennsylvania Dutch Country. I drive two hours from my home in Bethlehem through rolling hills, past tidy main streets lined with diners and craft shops. I pull to the side of country roads on the outskirts of New Holland, or Bird-in-Hand, or elsewhere in Lancaster County, and get out of my car to stretch and breathe in the crisp air and the rich, loamy odors.

I like to watch corn being harvested, which looks just as it does in the tourism brochures: A man wearing black pants held up by suspenders over a white buttoned shirt, with a straw hat, follows a slow, heavy draft horse pulling a corn-picking machine. It seems difficult and simple and inefficient and clean.

My mom and dad brought me to the harvest when I was a kid, and when I could drive I made the trip myself—which was just as well, because for a time in my teens and early 20s, I wasn't getting along too well with my family, or anyone else. I drank and got into trouble. The idea of a nine-to-five job filled me with a dull fear, but I wasn't sure what

other options I had. I had long hair and, I suspect, a look in my eyes that would have alarmed any of the farmers had they bothered to look my way.

Eventually I stopped drinking and, for the most part, stopped driving. I don't quite trust myself to remember exactly what I was thinking when I was that young man—I'm 56 now—but I think it had to do with the world being a dangerous place. I rode a bicycle everywhere—to the grocery store, the hardware store, and just about everywhere except Lancaster.

Through the years, I may have changed, but that annual trip didn't. Even as I grew older and began traveling more often, even as I began my career as a marathoner, then a race director and, for the past 25 years, as an ambassador for long-distance running, serving as this magazine's chief running officer, I kept returning for the corn harvest. Had I stopped to think about it—which I didn't—I might have admitted that the trip served as restorative pause in a life increasingly complicated, a life filled with texts and tweets, hotel lobbies, and air miles. Had I stopped to think about it—which I didn't—I also might have noted that the qualities I had been preaching as essential to any great long-distance runner were right in front of me on those fall pilgrimages: a love for the land, strength, endurance, and an appreciation for simple, productive labor. Had I stopped to think about it—which neither I nor anyone else I ever met had ever stopped to think about—I might have wondered what would happen if a community of inward-looking, healthy-living, labor-revering, modernity-shunning, tradition-bound religious people who looked really, really fit and strong ever got serious about athletics, ever committed themselves to winning foot races.

I started thinking about it because of my wife. Laura returned from the Bird-in-Hand Half-Marathon last September, where she won her age group and was as excited as I had ever seen her after a race. (Which is saying a lot, as she's run in 90 ultras and 128 marathons, in 17 countries on three continents.) She raved about how sweet everyone had been at the race, how polite, and how different the race was from any other. She said the race organizer, Jim Smucker, had asked if she was related to me, and when she told him she was my wife, he asked if I might be interested in coming to deliver one of my talks about running to some of the local citizens. He mentioned a regular run under the full moon, through something called the Valley of No Wires. The next one would occur the second week of October.

And that's how I ended up running with the Amish.

When Jim Smucker turned 25, he made a list of life goals. He wanted to be a successful businessman. He wanted to be a good husband and father. He wanted to run a marathon. Twenty years later, he hadn't crossed that last item off his list. Only when his younger brother, Jeff, told him that he was going to run a marathon did Smucker get serious about his lingering goal. He started training in June 2006, and ran the Steamtown Marathon in Scranton that September. His sister Ruthie's son, Jason, joined his uncles that day. Shortly thereafter, niece Laura started training, and by 2011 she had qualified for the Boston Marathon. Smucker is 50 now, and in the past four years, he has run 22

marathons, two 50-mile ultras, and one 50-K. His personal best is 3:30 (Jeff's is 2:58). There are five other Smucker siblings, and among them and their children—30 people in all—16 have now run at least one half-marathon. The slowest, Jim's daughter Rachel, has run a 4:29 marathon. "She's young," Smucker says. "She'll get faster."

The Smuckers are Mennonite, one of dozens of ways to be Anabaptist, a Christian tradition in which baptism takes place as an adult rather than as a child. In terms of strict adherence to a code of conduct and attachment to time-honored rituals, the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County sit on one end of the spectrum, and the more progressive groups of Mennonites on the other (though there are some Old Order Mennonites, too). Both groups hold fast to the principles of their forebearers—hard work, humility, modesty, community togetherness verging on clannishness, self-reliance, and a skeptical view of modernity—but whereas the Old Order Amish drive buggies and wear suspenders, Mennonites (at least most of them) drive and wear just about whatever they want. To make a crude and overly simplistic analogy, Old Order Amish are like Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Mennonites are a more acculturated, reformed branch. (Smucker's mother and father, for example, left the Old Order Amish to join the Mennonites.)

The running Smuckers became somewhat well known in the rolling hills of Lancaster County. At least among other Mennonites. Two years ago, Smucker was sitting at the counter of the restaurant he owns, the Bird-in-Hand Family Restaurant & Smorgasbord. A friend of his, a Mennonite insurance agent, told Smucker that one of his Amish clients liked to run, and that maybe they should meet. When they did, the Amish man told Smucker that he was thinking of running a marathon.

"That was new," Smucker remembers. "I didn't know the Amish ran marathons."

Smucker invited the Amish man to join him and another Mennonite runner, Terry Yoder, during one of their speed workouts. (I'm not using the Amish man's name because he and the other running Amish I met asked to remain anonymous, partly out of concern that church elders might think their running is self-centered or otherwise violative of the group's teaching.) The three met at the Conestoga Valley High School track to run 800-meter intervals. Yes, Yasso 800s, the workout I had devised 30 years ago to help runners predict their best marathon times. (What I discovered is that if you could run ten 800-meter intervals at a speed of three minutes, 50 seconds, for example, you could run a marathon in three hours, 50 minutes.)

Smucker and Yoder considered themselves fairly decent marathoners, but after nine 800s, the Amish man—who had never raced before—was keeping up with them. Not only that, he didn't seem to be struggling. In fact, Smucker remembers that he wasn't even breathing hard.

Smucker told him he needn't be polite, that he should go all out the last 800. "Run as fast as you like. See what you have left."

The trio started out together, but immediately the Amish man shot ahead. Yoder and

Smucker finished in 3:30. The Amish runner had finished at least 30 seconds ahead of them.

"I said, 'Holy cow!'" Smucker remembers. "'That guy is fast. Are there more of them?'"

There were. The Amish man who ran the 800s ran a marathon in 2010. Later that year, number two joined him. Then another friend ran. Last year, some three years after the track workout, six of the fastest competed in the 200-mile Lancaster to Mt. Pocono Ragnar Relay Series race. The Amish team called themselves Vella Shpringa (loosely translated, "let's run") and wore T-shirts they had designed. On the front of the T-shirt was a drawing of a running man with a beard and suspenders, and a hat flying off his head. He looked happy.

Of the 106 teams in the Ragnar Relay race, 90 had 12 members, and each of those team members ran three legs of the race, distances of 1.8 to 10.2 miles. Vella Shpringa was one of 16 "ultra" teams of only six runners each, whose members each ran six legs of 5 to 17 miles, twice the distance of the 12-person teams.

Vella Shpringa finished first among the ultra teams. It came in fourth overall.

Since then, the Amish runners have gotten faster, and now number several dozen. Smucker told me one even posted on his Facebook page his desire to run Boston and a 100-miler.

I don't know which surprised me more—the Amish runner's audacity or the fact that he had a Facebook page. I wondered something else, too. How had he—and his running cohorts—gotten so fast, so soon? What was their secret?

Last October I ran with Smucker, some of his Mennonite friends, and about 20 Amish. The Mennonites wore running shorts and running pants, and synthetic tops. The Amish men wore black pants held up with suspenders and long-sleeve, button-down shirts. Most were clean-shaven (Amish don't grow beards until they marry, which is usually a few years after they formally join the church). The one woman in the group wore a long dress and a head scarf. I should note that they all wore running shoes. I should also note that we were running by the light of the moon.

Todd Weaver, another Mennonite, Terry Yoder, and a few others had started the full-moon runs in the fall of 2007. Smucker joined in 2008, and early the next year he brought the marathoning Amish man, and then that man brought a few of his friends. These days, the full-moon runs draw as many as 30 people, Mennonites, Amish, and English (which is what the Old Order Amish call non-Anabaptists). The course changes each month, designed by whoever is hosting the run. That person notifies the holder of the contact list, who then e-mails and texts everyone where to meet. The host provides refreshments afterward.

We ran under a full moon, along back roads and unpaved farm lanes, past empty fields of

cornhusks. I had never seen such a bright moon. It lit up the hills and roads. If I had been carrying a paperback, I could have sat down and read it. I swear that at times I could feel the moonlight like brushed velvet on my neck. Only later did I realize why the moon seemed so otherworldly. We were running through farmland populated almost entirely by Old Order Amish, who don't use electricity from public utility poles. That's why locals refer to the area as the Valley of No Wires. A pilot once told Smucker that he and some fellow flyers use the dark patch of geography as a landmark when heading into Philadelphia at night. They call it the Black Hole.

When I remarked at the impressive luminescence, one of the runners mentioned that the moon had risen at 6:03 p.m. and would set at 6:48 a.m., and mentioned that the next full moon—and the next full-moon run—would occur on November 10, and that the moon would reach its maximum fullness at midnight. The information came to him naturally, the same way that I might mention that the Philadelphia Eagles would be playing the New Orleans Saints on the following Sunday evening, and that while the telecast started at 8 p.m., kickoff wouldn't occur until 8:15 p.m.

All six members of the Amish relay team ran that night. We kept to a 10-minute pace, though it was obvious to me, because of their strong, easy strides, that a few of the Amish runners could have surged ahead at any moment. One of them, a man in his 20s, about six-foot-two, most of that legs, ran in Vibram FiveFingers. He said he did so because he believed in the barefoot movement as a way to feel good and avoid injury when running. Someone joked that running barefoot had a more practical justification: Considering the farm lanes they ran, it was easier to wash horse manure off bare feet than it was off running shoes.

The discussion during the full-moon run was the same one that every group of runners I've ever joined has participated in: personal bests, upcoming races, business ups and downs, good-natured insults. A few of the faster Mennonites sped ahead the last mile, and when they got to the Bird-in-Hand Fire Station, doubled back to join the group.

"You can tell they're Mennonites," one of the Amish cracked, "they're going the wrong way again."

We gathered back at the fire station, where we had started, and were joined by wives, all in traditional head coverings and long dresses, barefoot children wearing straw hats, and, in back rows, church elders with long beards. Now, I have delivered talks and slide shows about running hundreds of times, in places ranging from equatorial Africa to Alaska. I have talked to overweight people skeptical that anything could help them get healthy, elite marathoners doubtful that anything coming from someone like me, who couldn't break four hours anymore, would be interesting. But as I gazed out at the silent faces, mostly nonrunners, at men who had never driven cars and small children who had never watched a television show, I thought this would be my toughest crowd ever.

But as I talked about marathons in Antarctica, and 146-mile races through Death Valley, and some of the more exotic African tribes I had met, and scarily large snakes I had

encountered on trail runs in India, the crowd was just as curious and engaged as any I had ever addressed. Afterward, as coffee and whoopie pies (two pieces of chocolate cake or gingerbread sandwiching a creamy filling) were served and as the Amish and a few Mennonites milled about, I took some questions. Many of the young men were eager to know what it took to qualify for a marathon, and whether I thought they could do it. One of the elders was fascinated by my trip to Jerusalem.

One man, who had already raced in seven marathons and who had recorded a PR of 2:49, wanted to talk training techniques.

It was around this time that it began to dawn on me that I had stumbled upon something wondrous. Practically in my backyard, I had discovered a semi-secret society of, if not running savants, at least raw running talent. The Mennonites were good runners, but the Amish—with their even harder lives, and even stricter rules—were clearly a cut above. I felt a little like Christopher (Born to Run)McDougall tracking down the legendary Tarahumara Indian runners in Mexico's Copper Canyon. Man, I wondered, with a little more training, just how good could these guys be?

Here are some of the things I learned about the Amish while running with them: Some Old Order Amish don't pay Social Security taxes and don't receive Social Security benefits. They attend church services every other Sunday and visit each other in their homes on the nonchurch Sundays. Public-utility electricity is forbidden, but battery power is okay. Cell phones and iPads are allowed (and sometimes powered by the sun), but generally only when they're used for business or in emergencies. Some Ohio Old Order Amish can ride bikes; most Lancaster County Old Order Amish are not supposed to. Many young Old Order Amish get around on inline skates. Young and old use homemade scooters, which are made by attaching bicycle tires to a low frame with handlebars. Most Mennonites can drive cars, but Old Order ones ride black buggies, and Lancaster's Old Order Amish gray ones.

One is not an official member of the Old Order Amish church until adulthood, and before then, one can drive a car, though it's not encouraged. Joining the church occurs before one marries. Marriage for men means it's time to stop shaving. Like teenagers everywhere, some youngsters have discovered ways to live within the letter if not the spirit of the law: A few have battery-powered horns in their buggies, as well as battery-powered boom boxes. But all Amish, young and old, are expected to dress modestly. For the women of Lancaster County, this means long skirts and hair coverings. For the men, it means solid-color shirts, black pants and dark shoes, and suspenders—yes, even when running.

If you choose not to join the church, you're still part of the community, but if you join, then leave, you are "shunned," which, one of the Amish tells me, isn't as harsh, in many cases, as you might imagine. "You don't sit at the same table as the church members at a wedding, but you're still invited," he says. Shunning aside, to forgive is not only divine, it's practiced. After 10 young girls were shot (five died of their wounds) at an Amish schoolhouse in 2006 by a non-Amish man who then killed himself, the community

banded together and consoled the shooter's wife and parents. The Amish also set aside funds to assist the family of the shooter, and more than 30 members of the community attended his funeral.

I learned that many of the young community members who haven't yet joined the church—not just the runners—had computers, were online, and had Facebook accounts, and that many of the older members were chubbier and more sedentary than past generations. Amish have until recently worked mostly as farmers—hard-working ones. (According to several studies, while the average American adult takes 5,000 steps in an average day, the average Amish adult male takes 18,425.) Because of a finite supply of farmland and growing families (there are approximately 30,000 Old Order Amish in Lancaster County, double the number from 25 years ago, and none of them believe in artificial birth control), though, more and more Amish are going into business, often for themselves.

One of the Amish runners is a solar-power installer. Another is in construction, and a third is a shoe dealer (all dark colors, including running shoes). One of the Vella Shpringa buys properties, fixes them, then sells or rents them.

The Old Order Amish, whose very existence in 21st-century America offers an object lesson on the inherent tensions between an old religion existing in a modern society, approach running with enthusiasm and some trepidation. On the one hand, the sport provides exercise, and a way to be part of a community, and simple, difficult labor with clearly demarcated rewards. An active lifestyle has always been natural for the group, and though overweening pride is anathema, a sense of achievement is not. "We get awards for doing well in school," one of the Vella Shpringa runners points out. "It's not like we're not encouraged to do our best."

Long-distance racing also offers a chance for this insular community to allow the English to see (and buy from) the Amish. The Bird-in-Hand Half-Marathon in September 2011 attracted 600 people (about 100 Anabaptists), down from 1,000 the year before, its first. This year, Smucker tells me, race organizers are hoping to get back to 1,000, partly by an increased number of Anabaptists. Smucker wants the race to become a strong local tradition as well as an annual destination for tourists and runners. He's arranged for Amish children in buggies to travel up and down the course, handing out water to runners. The outhouses at each of the six one-room Amish schoolhouses spread throughout the valley will provide bathroom breaks.

The Friday night after the 5-K and before the Saturday morning half-marathon, there will be the usual touches, like the launching of 10 hot air balloons, a big bonfire, and Amish pizza. I ask what Amish pizza is. "It's just like regular pizza," Smucker says, "but Amish."

As more Amish race, though, and get faster, there are risks. No one wants a repeat of the softball ban.

It's not something I'd previously noticed, but every Amish schoolhouse has a ball field next to it. Consequently, the Amish have for generations been really, really good at softball and baseball. So good, in fact, that some, in the past, were recruited to play on semipro teams. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Smucker's uncle, who was Old Order Amish, pitched semiprofessionally under an assumed name (his Amish catcher did the same). They didn't want their parents or church elders to see their names in any stories or box scores in local papers. They weren't sure either would approve. They were right to have worried.

Smucker's uncle and his battery mate eventually retired without having been found out, but 15 years ago, some other young Amish men weren't quite as careful, or quite as fortunate. They started playing in a number of leagues, and wearing uniforms, and after a while, it was apparently too much for the church elders to ignore. Whether it was too obvious a display of pride, or modernity, is not exactly clear. Kids can still play, but Amish church members in Lancaster County are now banned from playing softball and baseball.

None of the runners wants that to happen to their sport. None thinks it should happen. Of course they want to run faster, they say. Of course they want to improve. And yes, sure, winning is nice. But those are all secondary goals.

"I love the serenity of running alone as well as the fellowship of running with a group," one of the runners wrote to me in an e-mail. "I realize that every step, every breath, and every PR is a gift from God."

"My prayer," he continued, "is that [this article] can inspire many people, not only because we are a conservative and peculiar people, but because we love the Lord."

"Humility is important," says another Amish runner, a member of the victorious Ragnar Relay team. "When you start to elevate the individual above the community, that's a bad thing. I don't care for myself whether my picture or my name is in the paper. I wouldn't want to win a race to put the attention on anything I've ever done, but if I could do it to inspire other people, that's something I would do. That's something I hope can come out of it."

Smucker the Mennonite believes that physical fitness and goals are good for everyone. Smucker the businessman wants a lot of people to enter the Bird-in-Hand Half-Marathon in September. Smucker the runner believes in happy endings and the inspirational power of one. "My brother ran one marathon, and he inspired 16 of his family members to run half or full marathons," he says. "Imagine the power of example—how this could spread among the Amish."

The last time I ran with the Anabaptists, on December 10, 30 of us met in a barn on a hilly piece of land at the intersection of two roads just outside New Holland, Pennsylvania. Inside the barn, men pulled fleece jackets over their suspenders. Runners knotted around the propane heaters and lamps, and at 7 p.m., we set off.

All of the Ragnar victors were there again, and one wore his Vella Shpringa T-shirt. The barefoot runner was back in his FiveFingers. There were a few English runners, including a woman who worked at a nearby assisted-living center and who, at the barefoot runner's request, had given him swimming lessons so that he could compete in a triathalon.

We ran through the Valley of No Wires again, but on different roads, for 10 miles instead of five. We ran at a nine-minute-plus pace, and the Ragnar champions and many others held back, in deference to the slower members. I was one of the slowest. It was 30 degrees out, and under the clear, bright-moonlight sky, the air was dry and cold. We ran down Musser School Road, and along Groffdale Road, and past empty cornfields. (In the summer, runners need to pay attention at cornfield intersections, because visibility is blocked. A buggy might be coming round the bend.)

A buggy caught up with us at mile seven, and a woman in a long dress and head scarf hopped out. She had run 1,000 miles in the past year and wanted to join us for the last few miles. She looked to be about 30. One man running in the group had never gone farther than five miles and was ready to quit after six. When he saw me struggling (because of Lyme disease, distance is tough, and my limp is visible), he said, "You seemed to be having such a good time," so he decided to tough it out, too. Another buggy passed and the people inside—teenagers, I presumed—honked a battery-powered horn at us, and a few of the runners yelled out good-naturedly, "Vella Shpringa!"

Mile eight, and we had seen only three cars. Two more miles, and we would file back into our host's barn. Bathed in propane-powered lights, we would help ourselves to bowls of creamy vanilla ice cream, made at a dairy farm just down the road, and more whoopie pies, chocolate, and peanut butter. (The Old Order Amish, at least the ones in Lancaster County, seem to have a sweet tooth, their rangy physiques, ruddy complexions, and athletic prowess notwithstanding.) The host's father would join us, bearded and suspendered, and the runner's sister-in-law, and his four young nieces in blue dresses, one more wide-eyed and pink-cheeked than the next, and they would gaze in mute wonder at their big, sweating co-religionists. When the iPhones attached to the biceps of an English couple announced, in the metallic voice of Lance Armstrong ("This is Lance Armstrong!"), that each had achieved a personal best that night, the little girls would peer at the couple as if they were visitors from Pluto.

But we wouldn't have at the whoopie pies for another two miles. First we had to run down a hill, and up a ridge, past a desolate field of slaughtered corn, alongside a paved country road, breathing in the aromatic farmland, puffing out clouds into the chilly night air. There we were, some evangelical (when it came to marathons) Mennonites, a handful of curious English, and the running Amish—a knot of religious and cultural outliers with powerful, easy strides and great faith and no discernible body fat.

I was in the back of pack, and as I watched the men of Vella Shpringa lope through the buttery moonlight, it was easy to imagine upcoming triumphs, to calculate headline-grabbing records, to wonder again exactly what these Old Order Amish were capable of,

running for God and community, searching for divinity in speed, especially with some nutritional counseling and professional coaching. If they chose to, I am sure, they could run faster than I ever did.

I wondered what the church elders would think of a tastefully done movie.

A week later, over lunch at the Bird-in-Hand Family Restaurant & Smorgasbord with Smucker and one of the Vella Shpringa runners, I mentioned some of my impressions.

I said that the Old Order Amish might have a sizable advantage at long-distance running, coming from a culture that was so active, and that lived such a healthy lifestyle (Amish eschew alcohol and don't smoke, though there are exceptions; tobacco used to be a big cash crop on the farms and is still grown by some Amish today). I suggested that the Amish traditions of hard work and endurance, their history of farming, of stoicism and few automobiles conspired to create a potential stockpile of superior long-distance runners, and that Pennsylvania Dutch Country might be the birthplace of a new generation of marathon champions. Sort of *Born to Run* meets *Witness*.

"The Amish are hard-working people," Smucker agreed. "Running a half-marathon, or a marathon, is daunting for anybody, but they're more used to the hard work and effort than the average American is."

Sure. But wasn't there something more? With coaching and training, couldn't the Men Who Run Through The Valley of No Wires be made into dominant marathoners? Couldn't they become like Canadian curlers, or Finnish Nordic skiers, or Samoan linebackers, or Dominican shortstops, or the Old Order Amish softball sluggers of yore? I refrained from mentioning my movie idea. But they could see my excitement.

The Amish runner smiled. He, like many of his co-religionists, is an eminently practical man. He comes from generations of farmers, after all. He is a runner, to be sure, optimistic and cheerful, but unlike some more sentimental and soft-headed marathoners (mea culpa), not particularly given to flights of fancy.

"Well, we might be pretty fast compared to some of the Americans who eat fast food and don't exercise much," the humble young runner responded. "But I'm not sure it's such a good theory when you compare us to the Kenyans."