

# In the city, a not-so-fun run

## The Philadelphia Inquirer

By Stephen F. Gambescia

*The [Sunday] Philadelphia Inquirer* Currents p. D4

Posted: Sunday, December 22, 2013, 2:02 AM

The triple crown of road running in Philadelphia is complete and Old Man Winter is here. For three mornings of the year, during the Broad Street Run, the Philly Distance Run, and the Philadelphia Marathon, runners get support on our streets. The other days (and nights), the runner is jeered, not cheered. Most days, there is no room for the runner in the city.

Running is one of the most natural of human activities. Many envision "the runner" moving gracefully through clean, sandy beaches, wooded trails, or grassy knolls - generally off the beaten path.

But running in the city is innately antithetical to this vision.

First, the urban running scape is physically imposing. The slabs of concrete, tall buildings, streets, and infrastructure are visually imposing compared with more heartwarming scapes. To compensate, the runner mentally unbundles the landscape.

Unlike the gestalt feeling of running along the beaches, through the woods, and over the hills, the streetscape needs to be mentally scaled piecemeal. While the runner in more bucolic venues can enjoy the expanse and vista, the urban runner must tame the overbearing sights by taking one brick, curb, step, or concrete slab at a time.

The running surface in the city is unforgiving; it does not move. One reason the city runner takes to the street is because macadam or asphalt is softer than the concrete sidewalk; every little bit of give helps. Of course, this move can bring the runner into conflict with the automobile or, if encroaching on a bike lane, cyclists. Thus, the city runner must continually adjust her pathway to minimize risks.

Another obvious threat is air pollution, but there are few strategies to counter this threat. A runner must breathe, so he must suck it up.

The city runner is viewed by some as an exhibitionist. As a result, he becomes fair game for pedestrians and riders in vehicles passing by. Somehow, people, even generally civil people, believe they have license to make sport of runners as they go by.

How does the urban runner fare when faced with other moving parts in the city? The automobile (truck or bus, too), the streetcar, the bicyclist, the pedestrian? Who has the "right of way"? In most cases, the urban runner loses out. First, because in each encounter the runner is more vulnerable. Second, in each encounter the runner is perceived to have the ability to change direction or yield, even against pedestrians.

The conclusion, then, is, aside from a few major events, runners have no place in the city:

- They are not wanted on the sidewalk, as this is for pedestrians (and dogs).
- They are not wanted in the streets, as this is for vehicles.
- They are not wanted in the bike lanes, as cyclists take umbrage at this use of their hard-fought-for street space.

The runner in the city faces a dialectic between our most natural of activities and a highly contrived and unwelcoming environment. Urban running may be thought of as fun, adventurous, or liberating, but, truth be told, each encounter is a survival experience. On most days, there is no place for the runner in the city.

---

*Stephen F. Gambescia has been running the streets of Philadelphia since 1976*

[sfg23@drexel.edu](mailto:sfg23@drexel.edu)

[http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20131222\\_In\\_the\\_city\\_a\\_not-so-fun\\_run.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20131222_In_the_city_a_not-so-fun_run.html)