

# Philosophy of marathon runs

## Filozofia biegów maratońskich

Piotr Fajdek

---

### Article history:

Otrzymano/Received: 09.12.2019

Przyjęto do druku/Accepted:  
23.02.2020

Opublikowano/Publication date:  
marzec 2020/March 2020

### Abstract

The inquiry concerns the role of philosophy in the modern sport. It brings the heritage of great philosophers closer and emphasizes their relationships with people practicing running. It describes the mental zone of participants in marathon races, their motives and feelings, about the sport. The purpose of this study, was to investigate Does sport and philosophy may have something in common? Two totally different branches at first sight, gives us a chance to have a closer look on themselves. A wider perspective on sport by philosopher, on one hand and on the other, – chance to deep search in the mental zone of the athlete. Surprisingly running and philosophy have a lot in common. Both of branches are recognized as difficult, but results achieved may be very satisfying. In both disciplines patience and commitment is needed, and success comes very slowly. Every man is a philosopher, cause every one of us believes in natural law. We all as a mankind can conclude which kind of life is the best for us. Therefore, many of people decided to consciously engage in physical activity. As a way to enrich their personality, the way to discover their own self. As a way to response to the stresses of everyday life. Below we can find short comparison of two worlds – one which covers human mind, and other human body.

**Keywords:** philosophy, marathon runs

---

## Philosophy of marathon

Runners and philosophers both dream about getting somewhere. Oxford's dictionary describes word *discourse* comes from Latin language *discursus* – running around, spinning. Philosophers often “running around” with their questions: *What do we know? What's real? Is there a Good? How should I live? What is the real happiness?* All philosophers are looking for this kind of answers, so they could guide us all. Runners want to get somewhere too. It doesn't really matter is it a finish of workout or achieving great result in favourite marathon. For those advanced once's, running gives opportunity to discover themselves, and to have reflection about the world around us. With the development of civilization and the huge flow of information, man has largely developed his perception. He has been able to compare many ways of thinking about himself and his surroundings, reflecting and going his own way. Running is a very demanding activity, to achieve the desired goal, comes to wait just like in philosophy often years. Behind every success is the enormity of the work done in physical training, but also the work on himself. Mental training is extremely important. Most runners give the example of a 35 kilometer of marathon run. The famous “wall” – the moment when the energy reserves of the human body ends, to contend continuous physical work. Runners point out that this is where the biggest crisis comes out. The thoughts of withdrawing from the run is compounded by the feeling of

general fatigue and discouragement. However, something pushes them forward, does not allow themselves to retreat. Whether it's a reward that is so close or an impending end of anguish, it can be an individual matter, but “inner strength” pushes them towards achieving their goal. Philosophers in their lives also had to reckon with the hard way, often appreciated only after their death. However, something pushed them to continue their work, to further search for answers, the aforementioned “inner will of power” did not allow them to pervert from their chosen path, to abandon their goals.

## Philosophy and sport

*The meaning of life is not offered to anyone. Everyone has to acquire and create it* – Antoine de Saint-Exupery [2]. Philosophy is intended to answer questions about the purpose and meaning of the existence of himself and the surrounding world. *Who are we? Where are we going? What is the point of our lives?* These are the questions he poses to us. In ancient times, this field initially presented *theo* – and *cosmogonic* concepts of human origin and its role in the universe. It was only the ethical intellectualism of Socrates that defined the purposes and objects of philosophy, buying on the moral values and self-knowledge of man. Philosophy is not only to give a code of values, but also to be an inner inspiration, to broaden the horizons of thought and to encourage reflection. Help with internal building and improve-

ment of your own personality. Socrates ethics is reflected in the world of sport, from the ancient Games through the Olympus of Pierre De Coubertina, to modern sport and it's not only professional, but also this amateur. It outlined moral values not only for the life of every logically minded man, but also for those who adapted sport such as nobility. Long-distance runners, because of their length of effort, have a lot of time to think about life and the idea of improving themselves.

Sport is designed to create desirable volitional characteristics such as perseverance, discipline, concentration, overcoming fear and stress, and thus fits into the assumptions of philosophy for which personality character formation is essential. As in philosophy, in sport, we can cut ourselves off from the issues of everyday life, trying to reach the source – nature. *At the heart of the sporting fact* – as Lipiec [3] writes – *lies the originally cognitive theme: what I am towards the other person, what I am alone, that is, how much I can afford, what are others, what is a person in certain properties with respect to the conditions in question* [3].

Reaching the source, in addition to having an exploratory value in itself, also affects the creation of one's own and other beings. It's a tool modelling psychophysical self. A man who perfects his own body should first of all know it. For perfection, not only will, courage and perseverance are essential, but also reflection and observation. By observing the effects of our own and others' exercises, we can subject them to methodological reflection. Comparative analysis, solidarity, team action, pursuit of health, sense of struggle are unquestionably useful, causing the social aspects of exercise to be pleasing and effective [4]. Not only that, performing movement tasks and observing the behaviour of the body, contribute to raising their own capabilities and safety. Proper training loads cause progress, and eliminate injuries. *The philosophy of life* appears during the positivity period and is closely related to the person of Frederick Wilhelm Nietzsche, the creator of this branch. The basis is the theory of knowing everything that is some cognitive rather than object value. *The task of knowing is not the truth of things, but the truth of values. There is no reality, it is only chaotic, confused, deduced variability. The only reality for man is life and his goals* [2]. Every "thinking being" is able to outline their own philosophy of life, define values, goals and assumptions. Internal needs model a person's life, pushing him into one way or another. The philosophy of life is based on other fields of science, including natural sciences or history, defining the world and human life activity. *Cognition does not concern the world of reality as irrational, but merely an explanation of the process of the formation of facts and life phenomena* [2]. Man experiences not reason but will, reacts to certain phenomena with all himself, getting to know himself and judging others on his pattern. The philosophies of Frederick Nietzsche, we could emphasize in the world of runners. He discussed – personality transformation, internal conflict and willpower. All these elements accompany

the person who shaping their body. The runner undergoes transformation, after demonstrating the desire and interest in this discipline, passes many stages. Through an amateur runner, a pro – focused on achieving strictly sporting successes to a conscious runner, feeling in addition to health – promoting aspects, intellectual development. This transformation is often accompanied by internal conflict. Starting with the simplest forms of – *I just want to do run*, through reconciling work, family life and motor activity. The most relevant thing, in my opinion – is to emphasize the will of Nietzsche's power in runners. *The will of power expresses victory*. Tenacious endure of the opposites of fate, a sense of strength of the individual and self – control. Desire to win, the joy of victory, a sense of strength, ability to break all obstacles. So close to any runner's feelings accompanying it, whether it's training competitions. More broadly, Bergson, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, looked at the historical – biological direction of the philosophy of life. His theory of cognition (*cognition as an inner act of human personality*) and *the concept of life momentum (inner forces)* describe self-awareness, as an expression of human freedom. Only a person aware of his abilities, and limitations – is able to set goals and take the path to their realization. Every runner has to know himself, be aware of his skills and obstructions so he can plan the goal and method of achieving it rationally.

As a result of philosophical considerations in ancient Greece, a pattern of a full life, equivalent to body and spirit, has developed. Initially, philosophical considerations only affected the bodily side of the human body (*soma*), its military usefulness, physical perfection (*physis*). Greek myths were saturated with a cult of physical fitness, which conditioned success in life, among others, the myth of Herakles and his seven works. It was only Odysseus's trick with the Trojan horse, that proved- that success does not have to be strictly related to physical fitness, but also to the intellectual sphere – f.e cunning, etc. Thanks to which the leader in addition to physical fitness had to be characterized also by wisdom (*sophia*). And this love of wisdom combined with the word love (*phileo*), gave the term philosophy (*philosophie*). It is very difficult to talk about the philosophy of sport, or the philosophy of physical fitness education. Rather, philosophers sought answers about man's relationship with the social and natural environment, ontology (science of being), ethics (how to live to live was worth it), or finally aesthetics (ideals of the beauty of the human body) [6].

Aristotle's *friendship theories* (384 BC – 322 BC) also affect the environment of runners. *No one wants to live without friends, even if they have all the other goods in possession* [7]. Friendship is an essential part of a happy life, man by his nature is a stud being aimed at close relationships with others. We need social bonds to live in health and prosperity. Runners integrate with each other because of the same interest, joint participation in the same trove. Finally, the common joy of the laurel achieved [5]. The runner must be able to set goals for himself to score. Be

aware of skills and potential to set tasks according to abilities and desires. The Roman philosopher Seneca, claimed that life without purpose is a wandering, only achieving the intended goal brings a sweet taste of victory. Goals motivate us to work, they map the way we follow, filling the intermediate ones we go towards the biggest ones. They can vary depending on the running experience, or simple as *I start running twice a week*, or whether the more complicated *run marathon under three hours*. It is important that they are formulated, in such a way, as to act mitigatingly and push us towards new challenges. Consistency and self-confidence are essential to achieve their goals. We must focus on our purpose, and the way it is implemented – *Our life is what our thoughts will make of it* – Halous [5]. Only conscious performance of movement tasks will bring the expected results, and will give a diagnosis of potential and capabilities. Following this path, we can add, that we will not achieve nothing great without enthusiasm – in Emerson’s words [9] which relate to thinking about a running task, complementing them with emotional commitment. It will certainly be worse for a participant that is not positive, accepting its hardships. First of all, it will be difficult to enjoy and self-fulfilment. Descartes used to talk *challenge ourselves than the world*.

The common denominators of philosophy and running, can be easily observed today, but it was not the intention of the philosophical treatises to focus on them. It was only later that the period brought *the emergence of a new field*. In the twentieth century, the philosophy of sport was created, as a separate branch. Now, there are many publications and extensive literature on the subject, but we cannot fully state that it is a separate scientific field. So far it has drawn from other branches of philosophy rather than giving the other branch *something from itself*.

## Modern philosophy of sport

For centuries, the subject of sport philosophy, has not been taken seriously. The first attempt to define the philosophy of sport, as a field of scientific research was made by McBride. It did not directly solve the purely philosophical field of sport, it only indicated the need to establish its distinctiveness. The continuation of the issue, is contained in Howard Slusher’s book “Man, Sport and Existence”, which outlined the research area of sport philosophy in more detail. Slusher, in contrast to P. de Coubertain, concentrated on a traditionally philosophical field, without using elements of philosophy, psychology, pedagogy and sociology.

In his opinion, sport and human individuality coexist, both subject to experience. Sport is intimate, even spiritual, reaching the peak of human existence, giving room to discover the self. *Separately, neither man nor sport, is able to provide a sense of complete existence* [10]. One of the first books on the philosophy of sport mentions Paul Weiss’ 1969 work. (*Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*).

In his work, the author defined the intellectual subordination of the body to the will. The human body is not always prepared for what an athlete can or should do. It becomes prepared only after it has mastered the ability to function, according to the athlete’s assumptions. It does so, by forcing the body to perform a series of activities, which will translate into the achievement of the intended goals [11]. It is based on the elementary construction of individual movement habits, so that the body is able to perform, even the most complicated movement task. Thanks to this training, the body gains new possibilities, not only physically, but also to rethink the whole mechanism and tactics to perform the task.

In the 1970s, several new researchers of sports philosophy appeared. Worth mentioning here, is William J Morgan and his work *On the Path of Ontology of Sport* [6]. Also the Olympic gold medallist in rowing, and then professor of philosophy in Karlsruhe – Hans Lenk. The activity of the latter, brought many trade publications, including his book *Social Philosophy of Athletics* – in which, he makes a perverse statement that *the philosophy of sport is only in its infancy phase*. In the publication *Prolegomena Toward and Analytic Philosophy of Sport* (1985), H. Lenk stated that: *physical activity in its original psychophysical meaning is the fulfilment of human freedom*.

Achieving sporting success is the result of hard work and commitment, it is honest and true. Properly evaluated with a well-deserved laurel. The key issue here, is not caring for own body. Sense of freedom is achieved by overcoming, personal weaknesses, or by winning against the opponent and nature. However, in the case of competitive sport there are also many external threats, such as cases of manipulation, alienation, autocratic coaches, media pressure, etc. [12].

On the basis of the publications of the above mentioned researchers, in 1999 Józef Lipiec, in his book *Philosophy of Olympism*, published probably the broadest analysis of the basic branches of philosophy (ontology, etymology, ethics and aesthetics) in relation to sport. He pointed out, above all, the strengthening of the intellectual prestige of sport in anthropological philosophy, which – in his opinion, has gained a lot, as a result of contact with this field. In his opinion – *sport is a dream area to establish a philosophical image of man and to test anthropological hypotheses*. Simplifying, what is interesting in philosophical anthropology, will gain confirmation in the field of sport, which becomes, a source of reflection and analysis [13]. The path from philosophical anthropology to cultural anthropology of sport was overcome, by Kendall Blanchard in the publication *Anthropology of Sport*. (1995), in which – on the example of capoeira (Brazilian martial art), made an anthropological analysis, considering human freedom, the achieved abilities of the body or the metaphorical inversion of society.

## Sports and running

Sport of the 21st century has become the most widespread component of culture [14], and an integral part of mass culture. According to latest researches – *about one billion people around the world are associated with sport*, whether amateur or professional [15]. All over the world, every day people engage in physical activity for various reasons. The great economic and social potential of sport was also noted in the final document of the Davos Economic Conference [16]. Despite the fact that the percentage of people practicing sport in Poland is relatively low (39% of the society) [17], there are a number of scientific publications emphasizing the benefits that physical activity brings, both for the individual and his environment. An athletic body gives health and good condition, which in turn translates into economic functioning of man in society. The health of an individual is also the health of the general public and contributes to the development of civilization. Longer lifespan in a good psychophysical condition allows to use human potential to a greater extent. However, it should be noted that only an appropriate dose of sport will give pro – health effects. Too little training load will not give physiological effects, and too much can only do harm.

This raises the question: How to differentiate sport from other human activities? Z. Krawczyk distinguished three types of definitions of sport: ludic, agonistic and pedagogical, which differentiate it from other human activities. According to the *first definition (Latin, ludo – play, play)*, sport is a play – a game – without compulsion, of free will, of sacred character, economically and financially unproductive, emotionally involving. This concept of sport is a fragment of the ludic concept of human culture, published in 1938 in Johan Huizinga's book *Homo ludens. Play as a source of culture*, which claimed that play is an essential component of life, not only the sporting one, but also artistic or intellectual.

In the *agonistic concept (agon – fight)*, sport is first and foremost the fight of a player, whether with other players, himself, weather conditions, the environment or time and space, but with fair play and respect for the opponent. *The third concept of sport – pedagogical*, assumes treating sport only from the point of view of education, physical exercises, which shape the volitional features useful to society (honesty, solidarity, perseverance, self – discipline, etc.). Thanks to these three concepts of sport, it is possible to put forward a thesis – *that the philosophy of sport is a goal for people who want to be physically active*, whether in a master class or amateur class. Each person who decides on his or her adventure, sets goals for himself or herself. They do not have to be strictly connected with improving their body, they can also have social, psychological background.

The goal can be constantly modified, along with improving and enhancing the capabilities of your body. From the simplest (*wants to start moving*), it evolves over time (*I'm going to lose a few pounds*), to the most ambitious (*wants to win the champi-*

*onship in his discipline*). It is important that it is achievable and does not grow beyond its current potential. Otherwise, if it is not realized, it could have a demotivating effect.

All the concepts of the definition of sport and its place in culture provide a basis for reflection on the philosophy of running. Running can have a variety of reasons. It can be fun, an attractive way of spending free time, overcoming one's weaknesses or shaping one's own personality traits.

Running is the simplest form of physical activity. Because of its simplicity, it can be practiced anywhere and by anyone, with minimal financial resources. Moreover, conscious training will not burden the musculoskeletal system, but it will contribute to increasing fitness and achieving pro-health effects. *The free choice of being physically active* will mean challenging your body. The goals may vary and depend on one's own motivation (weight reduction, a marathon run of less than 3 hours, increasing physical fitness, getting to know other people with the same interests, sports tourism etc.). In today's world there is a growing trend to be physically active. With the technological development, resulting in the replacement of hard muscular work with the work of automation, man gains the opportunity to devote his free time not only to rest, but also to a healthy physical effort. Sitting mode, lack of physical activity during the day adversely affects the human being and his or her psychophysical health. Physical activity not only improves the human body, it also has a cultural and social impact. Therefore, it is important to compensate for inactive time with movement tasks. They contribute not only to the improvement of condition and health, but also to the improvement of training and opportunities to participate in various types of sports events, in terms of difficulty. All sports create *cultural patterns* (mythical, educational, symbolic, ideological, etc.) that make us feel part of a given group, behave according to the rules and submit to certain conditions. Our level of socialization increases, which in turn translates into personality development and self-esteem enrichment. Sport is also, *a form of psychosocial therapy*, that improves our health and well-being, although it should be noted that it can also foster undesirable phenomena such as alienation or dependence on physical activity. Running allows you to break away from everyday grey reality, bringing not only relaxation and forgetting about your worries, but also the opportunity to compete with yourself, with your weaknesses. For many runners, running alone is a form of psychological therapy. It is an opportunity to think about it, a kind of "purification" of the head. Ian Walker from the University of Bath, a researcher of athletes and long-distance runners, claims that along with extending the run length, mental training plays a greater role than physical preparation [18]. Different thoughts fly through the head, but it is worth to focus on those that allow you to forget about the hardships of running and focus on achieving your goal. While running, our thinking moves through a kind of parabola, alternating between hardship and pain, and the pleasure and happiness of this movement act.

Emily Bernstein and Richard Mc Nally from Harvard University, examined the participants for dealing with bad humour and negative emotions in a 30-minute run. At the beginning of the experiment they were shown a sad and emotionally arousing clip and a specially constructed form. Then some of them were asked to run for 30 minutes on an electric track. After the exercise, the participants were examined by means of a questionnaire, running and those who were sitting idle. The results showed that people who were physically active after the clip was displayed, coped with the emotions that the clip evoked in them faster. The cardio exercise helped to – *clear the head and reduce the feeling of sadness* [18].

But a 30-minute jogging run, is a totally different story, than a few hours' run. A long-distance run, burdening the movement system and the participant's mental sphere much more. Although running has been known to mankind since he started hunting to get food, jogging as a form of running training first appeared in New Zealand in the 1960s. Thanks to the Olympic team coach Arthur Lydiard, he became a way of life. This excellent trainer developed cross-country skiing training for his athletes, who were retired at the end of their sporting career. In 1962. William Bowerman, visiting New Zealand with his players from University of Oregon, had the opportunity to meet people jogging in athletic clubs. His observation showed that, New Zealanders over 30 years old, are much more athletic- than their US counterparts. After his return home, he considers – the possibilities of popularizing jogging among businessmen and housewives [19].

In this way, running, appeared in the consciousness of Americans as a form of health training and leisure activities. From that moment to the present day, *this form of physical activity has become extremely popular*. Its popularity on such a large scale has entailed the organization of many sporting events, for athletes representing different levels of advancement (from short running to ultramarathons). Thus, a sporting event has become an excellent tool for promoting cities, towns and tourist resorts. It also forced the participants to take a rational approach to training and observe their bodies. To set yourself the goal of running the marathon route, you should not only start running. These are often hours of physical training, proper supplementation and biological regeneration, and above all confrontation with oneself, with one's weaknesses and mental limitations.

Dr Ian Walker, says *the best way to face the long distance is to accept its hardships*. Run, as mentioned above, brings parallels of different feelings, from the “death wish” to feeling great. The method of overcoming difficult moments is to realize and remind ourselves during the run that although we feel bad, we will soon feel better again. Marathon runs are a burden that goes beyond our physiological capabilities. The so-called *wall*, i.e. the

magical 35 km, determines the exhaustion of energy resources in the human body, then the most difficult stage of the run begins. Then, we rely solely on our mentality. The right tactic for a long distance run is also important. The analysis of the collected data of Barry Smyth from the Running With Data blog during marathons in Dublin and Boston proves that the runners who ran the first half of the run at a fast pace completed the whole run with worse time than the rest of the participants [20]. It follows that only the right tactics and distribution of forces over the whole running distance will bring the intended results, in the form of achieving the assumed time target.

## References

- [1] Blackburn S. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1996.
- [2] Legowicz J. *Zarys historii filozofii*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; 1991.
- [3] Lipiec J. *Kalokagatia. Szkice z filozofii sportu*. Warszawa–Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; 1988.
- [4] de Coubertin P. *La philosophie de la culture physique*. [in:] *Textes choisis, vol. 1: Revelation*. Zurich: Helderheim; 1986:393–396.
- [5] Austin MW. *Running & Philosophy: a marathon for the mind*. Malden: MA: Blackwell Pub; 2007.
- [6] Lipoński W. *Historia Sportu*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; 2013.
- [7] Baggini J., Maccaro A. *Filozof na kozetce*. Warszawa: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal; 2014.
- [8] Morris T. *True success. A new philosophy of excellence*. New York: 1994.
- [9] Emerson RW. *Circles w: Self-Reliance* [in:] *Essays: First Series*; 1841.
- [10] Slusher H. *Man, Sport and Existence: A Critical Analysis*. Philadelphia: 1967.
- [11] Weiss P. *The Challenge of the Body, w Philosophy Inquiry in Sport*. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale; 1971.
- [12] Lenk H. *Zadania filozofii sportu*. [in:] *Filozofia kultury fizycznej. Konceptje i problemy*, red. Z. Krawczyk, J. Kosiewicz; 1990:(2)27–28.
- [13] Lipiec J. *Filozofia olimpizmu*. Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Sportowe SPRINT; 1999.
- [14] Krawczyk Z. *Spoleczno-kulturowe wartosci sportu w swietle badań empirycznych. Wych Fiz Sport*. 1983;3:46.
- [15] Godlewski P. *Podmiotowosc sportu a procesy globalizacyjne*. [in:] *Podmiotowosc w edukacji ery globalnego spoleczenstwa informacyjnego*. red. K. Pajak, A. Zduniak. Warszawa–Poznań; 2004:323–327.

**Streszczenie**

Praca ma na celu zaprezentowanie roli filozofii we współczesnym sporcie. Przybliżenie dziedzictwa wielkich filozofów oraz akcentowanie ich sposobu pojmowania świata, na tle ludzi ćwiczących bieganie. Założeniem było opisanie strefy mentalnej uczestników biegów maratońskich, ich motywów i odczucia wobec sportu. Celem tego badania była próba uzyskania odpowiedzi na pytanie *Czy sport i filozofia mogą mieć coś wspólnego?* Dwie zupełnie różne gałęzie na pierwszy rzut oka, dają nam szansę, aby przyjrzeć się bliżej sobie. Szersze spojrzenie na sport przez filozofa, z jednej strony, a z drugiej – szansa na zbadanie strefy psychicznej sportowca. Obydwie dziedziny są trudne, lecz ich rezultat może być bardzo satysfakcjonujący. Każda z nich wymaga ogromnego zaangażowania i cierpliwości, budowania sukcesu powoli, krok po kroku. W obu dyscyplinach potrzebna jest cierpliwość i zaangażowanie. Każdy z nas jest na swój sposób filozofem, każdy z nas wierzy w prawa natury. Jako istota myśląca, potrafimy wydedukować, jaki rodzaj życia jest najlepszy dla nas samych. Dlatego wiele osób postanowiło świadomie zaangażować się w aktywność fizyczną. Znaleźli w tym sposób na wzbogacenie ich osobowości, sposób na odkrycie własnego ja. Przyczyniło się również do odreagowania codziennego stresu. Poniżej zaprezentowano krótkie porównanie, zdawało by się dwóch odległych światów – pierwszego, którego przedmiotem jest sfera ludzkiego umysłu i drugiego traktującego jego ciało.

**Słowa kluczowe:** filozofia, biegi maratońskie

---