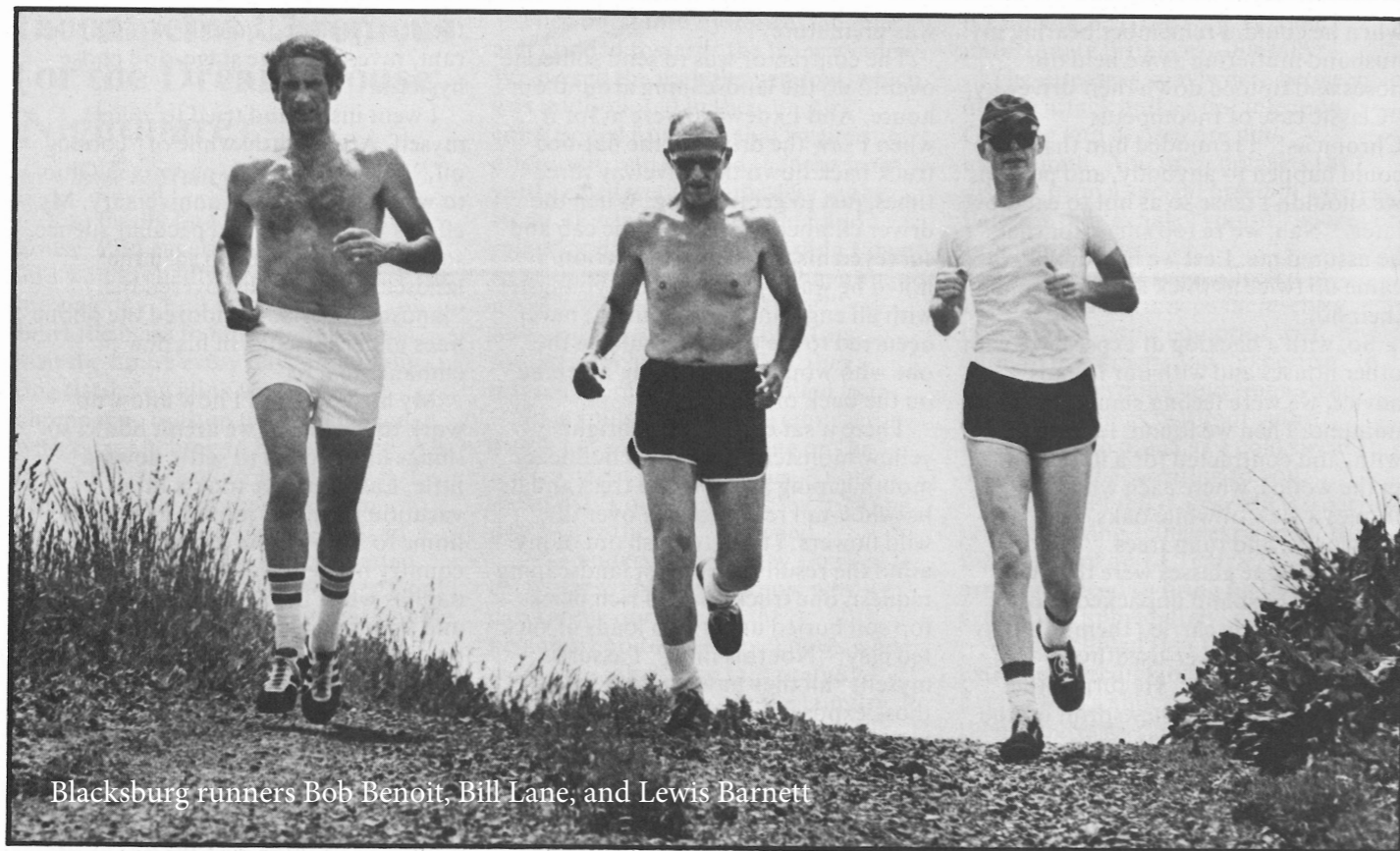


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# Virginia Tech



Blacksburg runners Bob Benoit, Bill Lane, and Lewis Barnett

Bob Veltri

## Running— A Pleasure, An Obsession

by Bob Pitner

Somewhere beneath the moldering leaves of a woodlot near Blacksburg, or in an adjacent cornfield, lies what is left of Dixie Griffin's gray wool hat. Griffin had fallen at least twice on the crusted snow before he noticed the hat was missing. His legs bleeding, with three cold miles between him and a hot shower, he decided not to stop and look for it.

Griffin has run past that spot more than two hundred times since that bitter January afternoon. For a while he kept an eye open for the ragged cap he loved and his wife hated. A running companion speculated that an amorous opossum had eloped with the fuzzy garment.

As temperatures rose from near zero to the nineties, Griffin forgot about it. The cap, along with strained muscles, occasional blisters, and worn-out \$30 shoes, is just part of the price Griffin is willing to pay for the pleasure of running.

Pleasure of running? Does your notion of distance running range from the gaunt forms of world-class

marathoners to the tortured face of your neighborhood jogger? Perhaps you recall your own short-lived efforts to shed a few pounds around the high-school track. "Pleasure" may not be the adjective you would apply to these activities.

But for Griffin and a dozen or so sinewy Virginia Tech faculty members, running has become more than a pleasure. It is an obsession.

You can spot them any day at about noon as they emerge from the gym and lope around the Drillfield and down past Smithfield Plantation, over a five-mile course known as "the loop." They vary in age from about thirty to their mid-fifties. Some run the loop two or three times a day, and most run from thirty to sixty miles a week. They run in driving blizzards and in sweltering heat, in the dust of August, and in April's mud. Most were running years before jogging became a fad.

Who are they and why do they do it? Why do some people run more miles in a week than most of their peers will walk in a month? The answers are as diverse as the runners themselves. There is only one trait they all share: none of them are fat. But that wasn't always so.

In November 1973, Griffin, then a twenty-four-year-old civil engineer in Norfolk, went to his doctor for a

check-up. At five-feet-eleven, Griffin weighed 210 pounds. His blood pressure was a dangerous 180 over 110. That afternoon, Griffin bought a pair of running shoes.

"Honestly, I couldn't run more than fifty yards. It wasn't enjoyable. The motivation was fear. I had to lose weight."

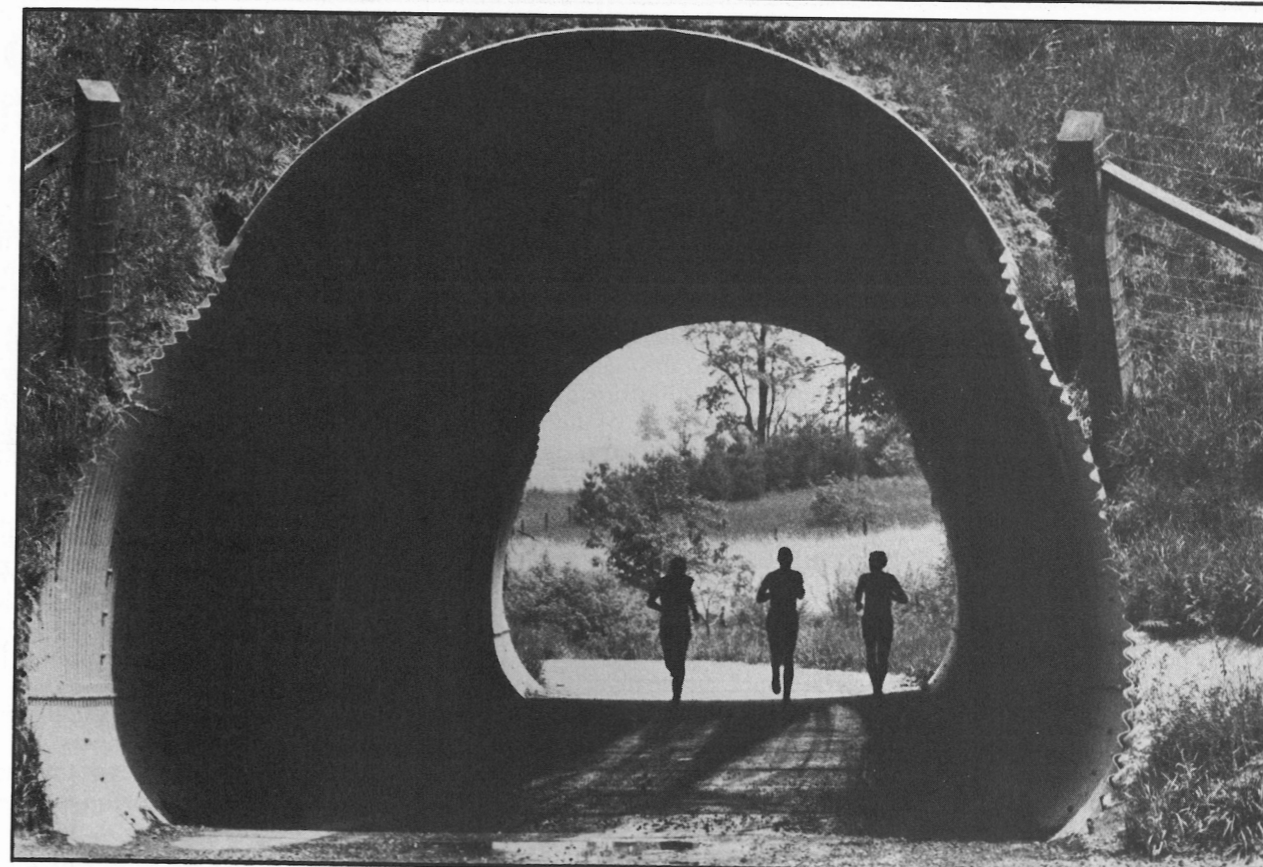
Five years later, and more than fifty pounds lighter, Griffin still runs every day. But his motivation has changed at least as much as his physique.

"Running somehow becomes as much a part of your life as eating and sleeping. It becomes a psychological need. Running acts as a release for petty frustrations. I think a lot of runners are under high stress. We need the release."

Bob Litschert never shared Griffin's weight problem. Litschert, a forty-three-year-old Tech business professor, is a former national class collegiate sprinter who recently has moved up to marathon distances. Although he praises the physical benefits of running, Litschert says running fulfills psychological needs as well.

"In general, I think running, while it doesn't lengthen your life, certainly improves the quality of your life. I'd go crazy if I couldn't run."

Litschert epitomizes the stereotype of the "lonely runner." A perfectionist,



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he views his body as a running machine. Disdaining companionship, he devotes his concentration to fine-tuning the machine. He is only remotely aware of such external factors as his surroundings or the weather.

Jim Wiggert doesn't mind the weather either, but for a different reason. He runs in the snow, rain, and heat, not because he can ignore the elements, but because he enjoys them.

"People will say, 'It's a nice day,' and I say, 'They are all nice.' Some are hot and some are cold, but they are all nice."

The forty-eight-year-old engineering professor is a born runner, but he never competes, and prefers to run with friends.

Combining some of the traits of Litschert and Wiggert is John Hosner, director of Tech's School of Forestry and Wildlife Resources. At fifty-three, Hosner is a marathoner and holder of the state record in his age group for the 10,000 meters. He is the consummate competitor.

"I guess competition is what makes life interesting. A lot of people just race to run, but I race to win."

Like Wiggert, Hosner prefers to run in a group. As one faculty member put it, "John is a great guy to run with, but don't ever try to run against him."

"John has become a yardstick to us,

not because of what he can do with his body, but because he is so mentally tough," says Bob Benoit, a microbiologist and frequent running companion.

Benoit didn't begin running long distances for health and recreation. A rawboned descendant of French-Canadian lumberjacks, Benoit grew up on a farm in northern Vermont. Sports were tolerated in the Benoit family only so long as they didn't interfere with work. So, after high-school basketball practice, the teenaged Benoit would run several miles home to finish his evening chores before dinner.

At age forty-four, Benoit is still running. He says the rugged farm life of his youth left him with "an undefined need for physical expression." His work often includes travel, but Benoit runs *wherever* he is. "I've run in some fierce conditions. I've run in Alaska and in the Antarctic. I've gotten frostbite of the lungs. I've run over the Brooklyn Bridge at dawn, and I've run in Las Vegas."

Benoit runs alone when he has to, but he would rather run with friends. In fact, he is writing a book entitled *The Runner as a Social Animal*.

"The book is about the rewards of running with a group of people. I don't like the term 'loner' applied to runners, but I've always felt that people who run

have more of an independent nature. In a group of runners everyone is independent.

"If you want to run at the end or at the head of the group, nobody cares. We will often stop when we see something particularly beautiful—a new snowfall or after an ice storm when the whole forest is a study in ice. That's an important part of running—the changing landscape.

"You ask me why I run. I'll paraphrase Robert Frost's response to a reporter who asked, 'Why do you write poetry?'

"To see if I can make my runs all different.

"Having got into a run, to see if I can get out.

"That answer might not be satisfactory to a runner who measures success with a stopwatch over a measured distance. But if one measures a successful run as an intangible positive response between body and soul, then Robert Frost's defense for poetry does indeed apply to running.

"Conversely, anyone who asks, 'What good is a poem?' probably will never ask, 'What good is a run?'" **VT**

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