

Running in the Gutter

By Michael Shafai

Long ago, I worked for a fellow who, like me, enjoys running. On most weekends, or sometimes after work, we would meet up at a local trailhead and put in anywhere between five to fifteen miles. A naturally talented athlete and a faster runner than me, he would generally put some distance between the two of us within a relatively short distance—usually within the first mile.

One Saturday morning, we headed out for a seven mile jaunt on one of our favorite trails. As we started running, in typical fashion, he pulled away from me within the first mile. But, either because he enjoyed my company or he was deathly afraid of mountain lions, he would wait for me at the top of each long climb. Because this particular loop was exceptionally hilly, our tortoise and hare pattern was repeated at least a dozen times. Each time, as I crested a hill, he would be there, patiently waiting for me.

At around five miles into the run, fighting gravity on a particularly unforgiving hill, I looked towards the summit and noticed that my boss was no longer waiting for me. As I zigged and zagged through each switchback, rounded each corner, and crested each subsequent hill, there was still no sign of him.

Within a half mile of the end, I came to an overlook that offered a bird's eye view of the road leading to the trailhead parking lot. From there, I caught a glimpse of his car driving away from the trailhead, traveling at double the posted speed limit, with a plume of dust rising in his wake. He was obviously in a big hurry.

At the time, I thought this was a bit strange. After all, we normally stop for a post-run cup of coffee to catch up on 'work matters' or 'family matters'.

As I made my easy jog back to the trailhead, I concluded that perhaps he had an appointment he neglected to mention, or maybe one of his kids had a basketball game about which he had simply overlooked.

I ran back to my car, pulled my keys out of the wheel-well, and hopped in, preparing to head home. As I turned the key in the ignition, I noticed a note tucked under my driver's side windshield wiper. Stiffly, I crawled out of the car and opened the note.

In my boss' handwriting, it said, "Hi. I had to poo. Meet me at the Starbucks on the corner of 3rd and Highland". After reading the note, I broke down laughing, because, as shameful as it is to admit, even at my age, potty humor always makes me laugh.

Fast forward six months later to our office holiday party. As was customary with my company at the time, all the employees would pitch in a few bucks to purchase a gift for the boss. Typically, one of our more bombastic employees when presenting the gift, would simultaneously roast him for the multitude of memorable, and ideally embarrassing, events that may have occurred during the past year.

Since nobody stepped forward that year to write the speech for the roast, I offered my services. Collaborating with another prankster in my office, we wrote a twenty minute discourse designed to make the audience both laugh and cry.

One of the more memorable parts of the speech included a short dissertation on the importance of effective employee communication. We cited that the ability to successfully communicate with employees is an essential quality in any manager.

And while we, the speechwriters, agreed that our boss was a great communicator, we publicly stated our opinion that he sometimes has the tendency to "over-communicate" certain things to employees. As if to prove the point, we produced the note he had left on my car six months earlier, entered it as "Exhibit A", and read it aloud, declaring it as a prime example of this type of behavior.

There were somewhere between 50 and 60 people at that party. When most of the room grew quiet, obviously finding the potty humor a bit offensive, we realized that we had perhaps made an error in judgment.

However there was one important thing I observed in those awkward seconds following our failed attempt at humor. About a half dozen people were actually laughing. And they were doing so in an exceptionally loud manner. I also noticed they all had one thing in common: They were all runners.

It was at that moment I realized that I had accidentally stumbled upon a major scientific breakthrough and came up with the following hypothesis:

Runners appreciate potty humor at significantly higher rates than non-runners.

Let's put this in perspective. In 1945, Alexander Fleming, Ernst Chain and Howard Florey won a Nobel Prize for the discovery and isolation of a powerful antibiotic drug that later became known as penicillin. Most textbooks, however, note that the actual discovery was attributed to a chance observation by Fleming in his lab nearly 17 years before the Nobel Prize was awarded. In other words, penicillin was discovered by accident!

This was my chance observation... my own version of penicillin. And I intended to work arduously and incessantly to seek answers to my questions and prove my theory.

In the months following the holiday party, I began to devise a means to test my hypothesis. I knew I would face significant obstacles yet I was firm in my resolve.

The first obstacle had to do with definitions. In order to prove my theory correct, I needed to define what it meant to be a "runner". I consulted multiple "experts" in order to create a litmus test of sorts, thus separating runners from non-runners. The experts I consulted included employees of prominent running stores (in order to qualify as a "prominent" store, the store needed to have a treadmill on the premises), webmasters from running-related websites, local race directors, members of running organizations, and anyone I met who had completed a marathon within the past 80 years.

After careful consideration, we came to a general consensus that at a bare minimum, a true "runner" was a person who runs at least three times per week for around 30 minutes average (3-4 miles) for each outing. After all, this requires a fair amount of discipline and commitment, especially in the winter.

So, armed with some pretty disgusting potty humor and a very shaky definition of a "runner", I put together an interview and took it to the masses. My interview contained the following six simple questions:

1) Do you consider yourself to be a runner?

Y N (Circle one. If <N>, please go on to question #3)

2) How many miles per week do you run?

- a) 1 – 9 miles
- b) 10 – 18 miles
- c) 19 – 27 miles
- d) 28 – 36 miles
- e) 36 miles or longer

3) Do you use the word "fartlek" at least once per month AND do you laugh when you say it?

Y N (Circle one)

On a scale between 1 and 10, please rate how humorous you find the following three jokes, 1 being the least funny, 10 being the most:

4) Two elderly men were eating breakfast in a restaurant one morning. Ed noticed something funny about Joe's ear. He said, "Joe did you know you've got a suppository in your left ear"? "I have? A suppository?", Joe replied. He pulled it out and stared at it. Then he said: "Ed. I'm glad you saw this thing. Now I think I know where my hearing aid is".

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5) There are two flies sitting on a pile of poo. One fly passes gas. The other fly looks at him and says, "Hey do ya mind? I'm eating here!"

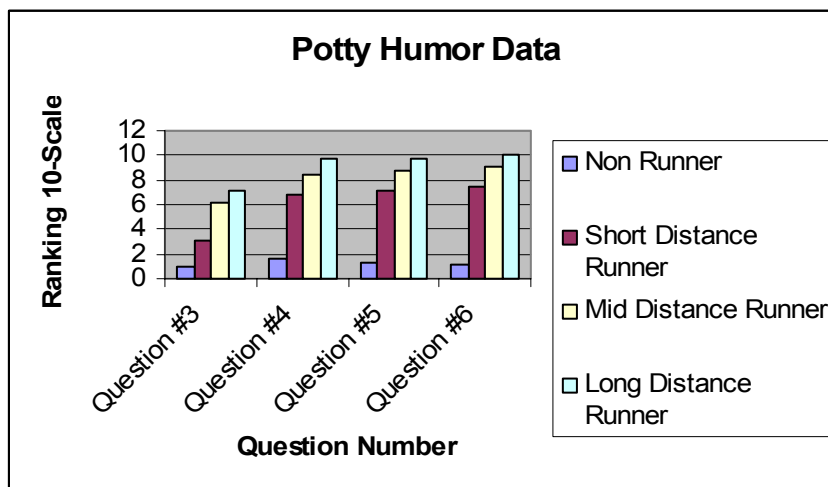
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6) What do you call a vegetarian with diarrhea? A salad shooter.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This interview was designed to be pure, short and simple. Because the interview actually distinguishes between runners and non-runners in the first two questions, there was no need for a "control group". Therefore, we distributed the short questionnaire throughout the city, in such places like college campuses, running stores, and public restrooms. The results were astonishing.

Following is the data in graphical form that highlights the findings:



While my initial hypothesis was overwhelmingly proven to be correct, there were a few additional and unexpected findings that came out of the research.

First, the non-runners grew increasingly impatient and more sensitive as the interviews went on. As a result, while they didn't find the first joke to be humorous (1.9 out of 10 rating), they progressively found each subsequent joke to be less humorous. (The last joke received a 1.1 rating from the "non-running" group).

Second, the opposite was true with "runners". While their ratings of the first joke were much higher than the "non-runners", ratings got higher and higher with each joke.

Finally, as the results show, my research found a direct, positive correlation between average weekly miles and potty humor appreciation. We separated the running group into short, middle, and long distance runners based on their responses to Question #2. We found that the farther one runs, the more he or she finds potty humor to be funny.

So, in summary, while the theory has been proven that indeed, runners appreciate the “comedy de la commode” more than those who do not run, I suppose the next question we must ask is why? Of course, I have my theories which I do intend to explore. So, please do not be offended if I approach you on the street, or in a restaurant, or on the trail, only to inquire about a harmless little joke I might have read on the bathroom wall.