



E04: Born to Run: From Race Training to Social Impact

O: I'm sure all of you are familiar with the concept of New Year's resolutions, and I'm pretty sure that you made the tons of these on New Year's Eve. Well now, let me introduce you to COVID resolutions. I'm talking about decisions to change our lifestyles based on some profound insights that we gained on ourselves during these weeks and months of quarantine and contemplation.

I'm sure many of you got a sudden urge to change something about yourselves and that includes your habits regarding exercise. Many of you probably got a sudden urge to get physical and decided to start working out or playing some sport or start jogging regularly at least. Either that or you were already into it and you could not wait for the quarantine measures to ease up a bit so you could get back on track, figuratively and literally.

As for the newbies in the running group, I can only hope that you will live up to your freshly made plans to utilize the freedom of movement and start doing sports. Running maybe a really good decision for you because you only need a pair of sneakers and the entire city becomes your playground. And in case you're a team player, there's good news for you - running can be a team sport as well. There's already a lot of experienced and friendly people ready to support you on your track.

I'm delighted to welcome miss Tijana Popadić, a fellow member of the BOS alumni network and the director of trčanje.rs website.

T: Imagine a world where all of the people would run or walk to work? Of course, I would be out of the job soon, but just imagine what kind of society that would be? If we dive into this incredible, and true, improbable future we would guess that we would have to have very flexible work hours to allow for that leisure of slowly walking towards goal. So for example, If you prefer to run to your job allow yourself at least 30 to 50 minutes in one way. And of course, you would have to have some kind of showers and lockers installed at your workplace. We would have little or no need for personal vehicles in the city, and would rely on public transportation.

But most importantly, that kind of society would be a very slow one. Main values would revolve around meaning, instead of time. And our output in terms of efficiency would have to be a more substantial one. Meaning, we would have to produce more quality in the same amount of the time.

So, that future is not a probable one. From day one our society paid extreme importance to efficiency in matters of output. We substituted walking to riding, by a horse, than chariot, trains, cars, planes. We value our time so much that we sacrificed the planet in terms of resources and sustainability for us not to walk.

But movement is essential to us. Bare that in mind for a moment. We were built to run. A few thousands of years cannot deny our evolution and proven history of long, systematic hunts and migration our ancestors endured. If we stop moving - we perish very fast. So we have a bit of a conundrum on our hands. We need something we don't have any use in our

daily lives. And we need it so much. We have this amazing paradox of driving in our cars for hours sometimes just to run 21 or 42 kilometers. Or to run on a treadmill.

This is why I am fascinated with movement, and running as its most elegant form. That is my mission, love and calling. And lately, we all find out that we need to move more, when that very option was taken away from us during quarantine.

O: They're saying don't hate the game, hate the player or it's the other way around who can tell anymore. Anyways, this can be applied to technology to certain extent, like many other aspects of our lives technology can either help us out or prevent us from being healthy and active. So my first question is - has technology development help the runners or has it become a hurdle on the track?

T: In terms of running movement, technology can be perceived as a welcomed partner. Modern runner is well equipped in all sorts of gadgets, uses advanced apps to track his progress, and even brag on socials. In terms of my job, which is digital marketing and especially advertising, we did manage to reach more people, through websites and our channels, so we managed to train more than 4000 people. So as a tool - I can not deny it being very useful.

But the dark side of this process is its potential to passivize and immobilize people. Binge watching, and many other rabbit holes of the internet are sure means to lock us in our houses, flats and lives. And lock us down to a chair or a couch. This I find immensely dangerous. If you examine our bodies you would find that we have become optimised for a sedentary lifestyle.

If we leave gyms out of the picture, as a body sculpting tool, we can agree that the human body optimizes for the task our habits and work put in front of us. We will gain muscle and specific types of muscle based on our activity. We will grow taller or shorter if we reach higher or lift heavy weight.

And if you sit for a 10 to 12 hours a day - your muscles iliopsoas (hip flexors) will shorten, your glutes will become inactive, your shoulders will bend towards your tummy, your back will become strained, your core non-existent... the list goes on. And this is not just an ugly sight - this posture leads to sickness. And sedentary lifestyle is the biggest predictor of untimely death. Similar, the best predictor for longevity - you guessed it is the amount of mileage you walk or run every day. And I can tell you - three times per week will not cut it.

O: The quarantine was tough for everyone, especially for the people who got used to being active and running regularly. How has the running community coped with COVID-19?

T: We have some data to prove that people in fact did move less, even though we have anecdotal (i.e. perceived) proves that parks were full. Google data for Croatia showed 84% decline in recreational activities and people visiting parks halved. Apple data showed that serbs walked 68% less compared to last year. My guess is that walkers just become more visible because group activities were banned. So the people who exercised in gyms, or clubs, now did that solo in their nearest park, or street.

Leaving out of the movement restrictions, we saw little or none decline in our group running programs in Belgrade Running Club, so we can say that for runners, at least fear

did not creep in, and they were grateful to continue to train outside in groups. Only change, of course, was bigger distance, and smaller subgroups.

O: All that being said, what is the next big trend in the recreational industry?

T: It is too early to really know for sure. There is huge uncertainty in perspective for the fall, due to the speculation of “2nd wave” of virus. Many major races and mass participation events were postponed to fall or canceled. We know, from our survey, that 75% of runners plan to return to races as quickly as possible. Fear did not stop that trend. But virus may have.

On our part, we predict that outdoor fitness will see some surge in popularity, people are reluctant to return to indoor gyms, due to hassle of security measures, and well - cause they missed outdoor. So it is one trend that we expect to grow huge in numbers, especially in urban environments.

We saw raise in popularity of Virtual Races, but I see it as a fad, and unless they manage to make them self-different and exotic people will not rush to participate and pay for them.

Nostalgia: Roses are red, violets are blue, running is healthy stop eating spaghetti! It is really catchy tune, isn't it? I used it whenever my colleagues had ordered fast food at the corner or complained that they had spent hours at public transportation. Oh, honey, I would never waste my time like that! Unlike them, I have started a new day with an energizing smoothie and then walked for over an hour to the office. Frankly speaking, I do not care about others' opinions, but I would hold up my desire to run freely and walk instead. Strangely this desire did not go away. It grew bigger a day after day, so before you knew it I started training for a half-marathon which breathe in me new energy and motivation. Three months later, a young colleague stepped in my office holding a cover page of a local newspaper and singing roses are red, violets are blue, what a running star you are.

T: Okay, so the way I see running and why it's so appealing is that, unlike 99% of other recreational activities and challenges you can put in front of you - running has the biggest payoff.

I was really reluctant to try it at first. It was 2011, 2012, and the “virus” of running had just started in Bgd. My friend was hooked and sure, I saw her happy, and god honest difficult. She only talked about running, and training, stopped going out on friday because - hay - training on saturday.

And they always tried to drag me in but of course, as many of us do - i hesitated. Until the Bgd marathon came. And I found myself cheering for her, and other runners on the hardest part of the track. And even run alongside her 500m till finish. And I felt it all. The rush, the glory, the pain and the payoff once I saw the finish line. I understood it organically. Through running, sure you connect to your body, and nature and in a way - return to yourself. You progress greatly in the first two months and can feel the healing effect. But at the end of all that, you have a real physical FINISH line. When you cross it - you are transformed for good. And you receive a real medal. So you have experience, but also a reward - and during the process, if you run in a club like ours, you also make friends. And those friendships, forged through pain and glory, I can tell you they last more than most of them.

O: We could say that you've been into running before it was cool, when there were no applications to which you could just share your result for the day on social media and similar stuff. So from this perspective, could you tell us more on how have you and your team used the technology to promote running? Based on your experience - what tendencies do you see regarding the development of the running community in Serbia?

T: As I mentioned briefly. for us - running was just emerging in Serbia when we started. Url trcanje.rs was available, so no one deemed it worthy at that time. We utilized that and Google, started with evergreen Google friendly articles, that are still on the first page whatever you need to Google.

Facebook was incredible, we rose from 10 to 40k fans in one year organically. We utilized fb ads, and Googles love for us and started with ambitious campaigns since 2013. We enrolled up to 500 people at one point to start running.

And soon enough, people started to copy us, clubs formed from our ex trainers, regionally the trend of "running schools" started blooming, we all learned from each other. Paradoxical, people laughed in 2011. At the idea that someone would pay to run (or learn to run), but it proved to be the backbone of the trend in Serbia. BGD maraton rose in numbers which coincide with our work so I can safely say we sowed that seed.

In 2016 we started the project through Serbia, some cities did better than others, some continued to work alone and we have Novi Sad and Subotica under our umbrella, but the internet and social networks really helped us.

Now, as you can see everyone on Facebook we found that people who enroll in running school tend to start older and older. So we can also say that we broaden our target group horizontally in terms of Serbia, but also vertically in terms of age. Many runners after finishing their fair share of city races now migrate to trail running and triathlon, Ironman is an example of a Huge brand, that pushes us to a limit which is not psychologically justified. If you are running just for a stress reduction or a healthy body, distances from 5 to 10k are more than enough. But the internet changed our goals as well.

O: We are today witnessing that public transportation is working in a limited capacity. Furthermore, people are reluctant to use it, because the risk of the disease spreading in public transport is of course higher. But even before the crisis most of us would get stuck in traffic on a daily basis anyway. So both, the old ways and the new risks could actually nudge people into changing their habits and start walking, running or riding a bicycle to work. How realistic is this change and what should we do on our part to make it happen?

T: This is a really interesting question. We tried to team up with Infostud to ask domestic companies are they providing facilities that runners can utilize if they choose to run to work? Results are not great, but also, sample was small.

As I mentioned above, we should really try to at least envision this kind of world where we chose to walk/run instead of ride. Bicycling is also a good choice but - we are still sitting and we need to use our body nature intended. This is why our motto for the next 10 years is a BATTLE FOR MOVEMENT (bitka za kretanje). And there are many stakeholders in this - from employers, to NGOs, and of course legislative. We should try and create environment where walking is encouraged, through substitutions, flexibility and promotion.

We launched the Serbia Business Run series in 2016. Starting with Belgrade, we added 3 more cities: Novi Sad, Subotica, Niš to the calendar and we are trying to promote running as a great team building tool, and to partner up with our sponsors to teach about the dangers of sedentary lifestyle and practices how to counteract this in our daily and business lives.

O: Trcanje.rs is a good example how we can utilize technology to activate people and make a broader social impact. Do you know any other local initiatives of this kind?

T: Best one I can think of is the Pruži korak app, which started “a walking revolution” last year, connecting users with mobile phones and donors, which donated certain fees matching it on your mileage. I think one of the reasons it became huge - is because UX was fairly easy. Once you installed an app, it took over, you don't need to open it or start it in order to record steps. Another reason was that, once given a chance, and provided it is convenient and easy - people do show up for social and environmental reasons and can act as activists. I think they got a huge motive to walk, a good cause, and saw an immediate effect of their action. And that is a perfect storm for a change.

O: We're almost at the finish line. So for the end, let's light our listeners up with some key take from this episode.

T: Show them - don't tell. Storytelling indeed became storydoing, and huge motivation can be drawn just from being a participant in events such as the Belgrade Marathon. When you provide people with purpose, and teach them how to act with ease in their own best interest I find even some tough challenges can prove irresistible.

Remember who you are -our ancestors were the most dominating species on Earth because we were born to run, and we could, and still can outrun every animal in long distance race. People don't know that but there are like races of people and horses and given it one or two days. Every human is persistent enough can outrun a horse because they get tired, they don't sweat and our heart beats in different ways.

What does not move - dies off, as a part of you, or as a whole. So park your car a bit further. Leave bus two stations early. Sacrifice time for substance, venture to your day an hour early so you could walk to work.

O: Fusing Futures: Light Them Up is a Belgrade Open School's audio podcast. Members of BOS alumni network – Tijana Popadić, Gordana Bojanić, Jelena Šapić and myself, Ognjan Pantić, took part in making this sixth episode. Aleksa Račić and Marko Mitrović supported by designing the sound and audio effects. In order to stay on track with us and stay tuned, do not forget to click subscribe at Apple Podcast or any other application you use to listen to podcasts. For more updates, follow us on Instagram and Twitter.