
To my running friends (barefoot runners and not-so-barefoot runners alike):

I know that most of you have read *Born to Run* (currently 14th on the *New York Times* bestseller list) about the Tarahumara runners and the running shoe debate. A while back I'd heard that some Tarahumara had once run in the Texas Relays, a national track and field meet held on the UT campus each spring. I did a little research and found an interesting story. From what I can tell, the first officiated ultramarathon in the United States was a 90-mile run by Tarahumara from San Antonio to Austin as part of the 1927 Texas Relays.

Think of this as a humble sidebar to *Born to Run*. I'll try to post it on the forums as well. Hope you enjoy it.

Jim

A Tarahumara Run through Texas

by Jim Nicar

Azure blue skies, mild temperatures, and a steady north breeze greeted more than 10,000 spectators to the third annual Texas Relays on March 25, 1927. Held at Memorial Stadium on the University of Texas campus, the fledgling track and field meet had swelled from a few hundred participants in 1925 to more than 1,000 athletes from two countries. An intercollegiate division boasted squads from a dozen states and the University of Mexico, former and future Olympians competed, 13 records were broken, and the celebrated University of Michigan football coach, Fielding "Hurry Up" Yost, served as the Head Referee.



Newspapers across the country lauded the Relays as a tremendous success. But most of the attention was focused not on the events in the stadium, but on the prowess of six Tarahumara runners from the isolated Copper Canyon region in northern Mexico. Their debut in Texas was the result of a series of events that involved the Olympic movement, Mexican nationalism, and some savvy promotion for track and field.

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For the last two weeks in October, 1926, the inaugural Central American Games were held in Mexico City. An initiative by the International Olympic Committee, it was hoped that regional Olympic-styled gatherings would promote greater interest and participation in the main Olympic Games. Mexico was an agreeable host. After a 10-year, sometimes violent, revolution from 1910 – 1920, both the government and citizens of Mexico were eager to restore the country's tarnished image. Though 14 nations were invited to the Games, only three – Mexico, Cuba, and Guatemala – sent teams to compete in baseball, basketball, swimming, fencing, track and field, and other sports.



The final event was a well-publicized 100km (62 mile) distance race, and while it was officially a part of the Games, it had to be postponed until Sunday, November 7, five days after the closing ceremony. The race featured a pair of runners from the little-known and reclusive Tarahumara villages from the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Starting at 3:05am in front of the city hall in the town of Pachuca, Tomas Zafiro and Leonicio San Miguel made their way southwest to Mexico City, the pre-dawn road lit by the headlights of police motorcycles, cars carrying reporters, and an ambulance. Because the Tarahumara had their own native dialect and spoke little Spanish, an interpreter ran alongside the other two for the first 75km and relayed comments to the reporters. As the runners neared Mexico City, an ever-growing throng of supporters crammed the route and impeded their progress. Nine hours and 37



minutes after the start, the pair arrived in a packed National Stadium, where they were swarmed by an ecstatic, cheering crowd, and hailed as national heroes.

Each runner was awarded a crimson scarf, a modern plow, and 30 yards of white cotton cloth. When asked to participate in the race, Zafiro and San Miguel initially declined, as it would mean missing harvest time for their corn crops, which they planned to exchange for 30 yards of cloth. The issue caused the postponement of the race, until the governor of Chihuahua volunteered to provide the cloth as a guarantee against any loss of the harvest.

The distance race easily received more press than any other event at the Games, and had the intended effect of both promoting the regional Olympic movement and showcasing Mexican endurance athletes. Soon after the race, the Mexican government petitioned the IOC to include a 100km race in the upcoming 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam.

In the United States, the event was described as "a race which has no parallel in sporting history," and accounts were awash with speculation. Some claimed Mexico was an up-and-coming athletic power, and Zafiro a contender for marathon gold at the next Olympics. A *Time* magazine reporter who covered the 100km race asked the runners how they were able to traverse such extraordinary distances. Zafiro responded:

"We are strong because we live in the open air...We eat, four times a day, frijoles and chili with tortillas. Also we like deer meat, chickens, turtles, lizards, and rabbits. We chew peyote (grilled corn meal with spices), and on feasts we drink pinole (corn-fermented beer). No one of our tribe would eat the meat of any creature that fed upon another creature. Reverence lends wings to the legs. Only thus can a man be happy."

## INDIAN RUNNERS CAN TIRE HORSES

Tarahumares of Mexico Astonish the World by Their Pace and Endurance—Invoke the Art of Sorcery in Their Games

**A**LONG the highway from Pachuca to Mexico City ran two Indians, bearing a letter from the Governor of Hidalgo State to the Governor of the Federal District. For them, members of the Tarahumara tribe, it was no particularly great feat to cover the 62½ miles in 9 hours 37 minutes. But when, on Nov. 7, they reached the Athletic Stadium in Mexico City the telegraph wires began to buzz, and in a few hours the world was reading the story of their run, a run which has no parallel in sporting history.

Before Thomas Zafiro and Leonido San Miguel came out of their isolated territory to give the performance—

ball with his toes (none of them wears shoes), making it go as much as 100 yards, then follows in the same jog-trot as before. The ball is never touched by hand after the start of the race unless it lodges between rocks or in some other awkward position.

At one course near Carichio the circuit is fourteen miles long, and as many as twelve legs are usually run without stopping. No wonder Zafiro and San Miguel were not exhausted at the end of their sixty-two miles; the distance was comparatively short.

More important than the course are the magical devices by which each team seeks to insure its own success. The manager, after agreeing upon the



The *New York Times* ran a series of articles on the Tarahumara, including one in January, 1927, which described them as cave dwellers from the wilds of Hidalgo. "Civilization has barely touched them; they are the unsentient children of the earth." The article provided extensive – and likely exaggerated – details of Tarahumaran beliefs and traditions. As for their endurance, "Mexicans employ these Indians to run wild horses into a corral. It may take two or three days, but the horses are driven in, entirely exhausted, while the Indians finish almost as fresh as at the start."

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Theo Belmont, the athletic director for the University of Texas in Austin, read the *New York Times* articles with great interest, and mulled the possibility of bringing Tarahumara runners to the Texas Relays. Belmont and UT track coach Clyde Littlefield founded the Relays in 1925, and hoped to create an event that would have national stature, on par with the already established Penn and Drake Relays. If a 100km race generated a media spectacle in Mexico, what might a longer run do in Austin?

Bellmont contacted longtime acquaintance Enrique Aguirre, the Minister of Physical Education for Mexico and the head of Mexico's YMCA. (Bellmont had directed the YMCA in Houston before he was hired by the University.) Aguirre was an easy sell. Having the Tarahumara race in the United States would bring added exposure to the runners and strengthen Mexico's petition with the IOC. Though the Relays were scheduled for the end of March, only a couple of months away, Aguirre agreed to send six Tarahumara, three men and three women. To preserve their amateur status for a possible Olympic berth, the runners would not be paid. Instead, a monetary donation was given to the Mexican government to build new schools in some of the Tarahumara villages.

Plans were made for two races. The women would run a traditional marathon distance of 26.2 miles that began in central Austin, proceeded north to the small town of Round Rock, and then returned to finish at Memorial Stadium, where the Relays would already be underway.

By itself, an all-female marathon would be a sensation. The United States was enjoying the raucous "Roaring Twenties" and women had not only won the right to vote at the start of the decade, but were actively stretching the limits of longstanding social mores. Skirts with hemlines above the knees, smoking in public, driving automobiles, and even cheering at athletic events were considered new and daring, and would have been branded "unladylike" and unthinkable behavior just ten years earlier.

Locally, while the University of Texas had admitted women since it opened in 1883, co-eds still had to follow the strict regulations found on most American college campuses. University administrators were anxious to protect a lady's "delicate constitution," limited a co-ed's social outings to three times per week (that's all they could stand), and enforced a 10pm curfew most evenings. Sports, in small doses, were considered healthy, but physicians generally advised against "undue physical exertion." Too much running and jumping might "break something" and deny a woman the opportunity for motherhood after college. Some doctors were convinced that a co-ed ought not to study during a particular time of the month, as it would drain the body's energies away from more important tasks. For the residents of Austin, along with much of the country, the idea that three women could safely attempt to run a marathon was counter to the prevailing social and medical tenets of the time.

The men's race would be even more astounding. The trio of men would traverse an 82 mile (137 km) route from the Alamo in San Antonio north to Austin, also ending at the UT stadium. Both races would begin, as best as could be estimated, so that all of the runners would arrive at the finish line at about the same time.

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On the last day of February, qualifying races were held in Mexico to determine which Tarahumara would participate in the Relays the following month. The women completed a 45km (27.9 mile) route, won by Juanita Paciencia, in four hours and 56 minutes, followed by two sisters, Juanita and Lola Cuzarare. The men ran 100km, and 38-year old Tomas Zafiro bettered his time from the previous November by an extraordinary two hours, finishing in seven hours and 35 minutes (about 7:15 per mile pace). Jose Torres and Augustin Salido claimed the remaining slots.

Zafiro's accomplishment only heightened the anticipation of the Relays, and sparked a debate as

to whether the runners' athleticism was genuine. John Kieren, a columnist for the *New York Times*, claimed doubters thought the Tarahumara "ran short miles and timed themselves by phases of the moon. This time they will run a distance measured in English miles and they will be timed by a split second watch, though...an alarm clock would do just as well."

As for the women, Kieren was even more pessimistic, and compared their efforts to the Olympic marathon record, then held by Hannes Kolehmainen of Finland at two hours and 32 minutes. "That's the record that the three Tarahumara squaws will try to beat," stated Kieren, incorrectly. "There are plenty of conservative athletic observers who are willing to bet a grand piano to a flat note that the Tarahumara squaws will be as far from the record as Portland, Me. is from Portland, Ore."

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As the week of the Texas Relays arrived, the city of Austin found itself in the glare of an international limelight, and did its best to welcome all of the athletes, especially their guests from across the southern border. The Tarahumara were to stay at the Driskill Hotel, considered the best accommodations in town. Lamp posts along Congress Avenue, the main boulevard that extended south from the state capitol, were draped in colorful bunting that alternated between the red, white, and blue of the United States (or Texas), and the green, white, and red national hues of Mexico. University president Robert Vinson announced that classes would be suspended on the Friday afternoon of the race, and encouraged UT students to attend the Relays or line the streets to support the Tarahumara runners.

Just before sunset on Tuesday, March 22, three days before the race, six Tarahumara runners, two interpreters, and a manager disembarked a train at the Austin station and were promptly overwhelmed by curious Austin citizens, a bevy of reporters, and the inventions and conveniences of the modern world. Steam-heated Pullman cars on the train, hotel elevators, and phonograph recordings were all novel experiences.

Wednesday morning, the runners completed a brief 5-mile warm-up at the stadium, and then spent the rest of the day either relaxing at the hotel or seeing the sites of Austin. Contemporary appliances were a constant interest; the group closely inspected the gas stove in the hotel kitchen, and asked to see it lit to make sure "there was no trick about it." Dressed in their traditional attire of shorts, blouses, and sandals (and shawls for the ladies), the entire group set off for an early evening stroll down Congress Avenue. They stared at the dome of the state capitol, gazed in amazement through the shop windows, and asked to hear another phonograph recording. Followed everywhere by a crowd of reporters and onlookers, the scene brought downtown traffic to a halt.

On Thursday, the men left for San Antonio and studied the route they would follow back to Austin. According to local newspapers, the runners "shook their heads dubiously" as they examined the occasional gravel-strewn sections of the road. "Sandals will be worn on the cruellest stretches, but the Indians prefer to run barefooted."

Once in San Antonio, most of the day was devoted to rest and final preparations. The three drank an herbal tea, likely brewed from chia seeds. "According to Tarahumara tradition, the drinking of this beverage gives the drinker speed," reported the *Austin American*. The men rubbed their skin with another herbal concoction, to ensure endurance, and then "uttered certain lucky phrases," to give their efforts the best chance for success.

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In a scene very similar to the 100km race the previous November, the Tarahumara men gathered in the middle of the night on the steps of the San Antonio City Hall. The start line was

changed from the Alamo at the last minute, though it increased the route to Austin to 89.4 miles (149km). Instead of their customary native garb, the three were outfitted in white track uniforms with the tri-colored shield of Mexico embroidered on their shirts. Around their waists they wore belts of small bells. The belts served a dual purpose: the jingle of the bells helped to maintain a consistent pace while running, and, as each belt had a unique tone, they allowed the runners to know the whereabouts of their companions. The men carried four-foot long canes, and as an added promotion for the race, one bore a written message of greeting from the mayor of San Antonio to the governor of Texas in Austin.

The starting gun sounded at 3:19am Friday morning. Headlights of support vehicles and the flash bulbs of numerous cameras illuminated the way. The men completed six miles in the first 60 minutes, and then gradually increased their pace to a little more than seven miles an hour. A steady headwind, warm temperatures, and graveled roads were all challenges, and as the sun rose over the central Texas landscape, the trio donned "wide sombreros" to ward off the glare. Along the way, they peyote, oranges, and frequently drank water from a ladle without breaking their stride.

Augustin Salido, the youngest of the group at 22 years old, began to suffer stomach cramps at mile 32. The others stopped and walked for a while to see if he would recover. Still in pain, Salido attempted to continue the run. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "He stuck gamely to the pace, running 27 more miles before collapsing. He was taken into one of the official cars and had recovered by the time the race was over."

The remaining runners, Tomas Zafiro, 38, and Jose Torres, 24, continued on to Austin, attracting large crowds as they passed through towns along the way. An increasing number of cars tried to follow along, congested the highway, and created so much carbon monoxide exhaust that race officials became concerned for the health of the Tarahumara. Motorists were directed to keep their distance, but the growing logjam slowed the runners' progress to just four miles an hour as they reached the outskirts of Austin.

In the meantime, the women began their race at 11:30am in front of the downtown headquarters of the *Austin American* newspaper. Clad in more traditional garments of loose, bright red shorts, white blouses, red bandanas, and sandals, the ladies also sported bells and carried canes. Thousands of Austin citizens turned out at the start and along the course.

Early in the race, Juanita Paciencia, 15, had trouble with her sandals and fell behind. After stopping twice to readjust them, she discarded her shoes altogether and continued barefoot. But as the temperatures climbed, the pavement became an issue, and at mile 24, Paciencia dropped out of the race because the road was too hot. The warm weather also affected Juanita Cuzarare, 16, who had led most of the way, but stopped within sight of the stadium.



Fourteen year old Lola Cuzarare, the lone finisher, entered Memorial Stadium, removed her sandals, and completed the race in four hours and 42 minutes. As she approached the finish line, Cuzarare tried to duck under the tape, unaware that she was supposed to run through it. She continued running several laps, smiling to a noisy and appreciative crowd, until Texas Relays officials stopped her and escorted her off the track.

Almost two hours later, at 6:12pm, Zafiro and Torres reached their goal in 14 hours and 53 minutes. It was "a feat that would kill an ordinary horse," declared the *Washington Post*, but the pair "finished apparently as fresh as when they started."



Details of the races were printed in newspapers as far away as South America and Europe, the government of Mexico added to their IOC petition the request for a women's marathon, and Theo Bellmont was heralded locally as "putting Austin on the map." But despite the popularity of the Tarahumara, the IOC did not include a 100km race or a women's marathon in its 1928 Amsterdam games. Two Tarahumara runners, including Jose Torres, represented Mexico in the men's marathon, but as their training emphasized distance over speed, they finished in 32nd and 35<sup>th</sup> place.

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