

Something in the water

DEREK HOUGH
BELIEVES THE
DECLINE IN WESTERN
DISTANCE RUNNING
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TO CHEMICALS IN
TAP WATER AND
ELSEWHERE THAT
LEAD TO FAT GAIN

THERE is no doubt that people have significantly different physiques than those in the Seventies and earlier. You just need to look at video footage from the Sixties.

Recently, I watched footage of a holiday camp swimming pool in the Sixties and was impressed at the physiques of the young people. They were well honed, had low fat levels and were naturally athletic. A few minutes later a news item showed young men on a building site, shirtless and working hard lifting heavy loads and climbing ladders all day. But the physiques of these young men were not nearly as athletic as they would have been 50 years earlier.

They may have been taller than their predecessors from the Sixties but these modern young men had less well-defined muscles smoothed out by a layer of body fat. The usual reasons given for the increasing levels of fat are lack of exercise and poor diet. Now you're not telling me men on building sites had a better diet in the Sixties than they do today. Their diet consisted of pints of beer, cooked breakfasts and piles of fat-laden chips with everything twice a day. And you can't say that a current-day building site worker lacks exercise.

We're not just getting fatter, we are also getting taller. Paul Dodge, the outstanding England centre from the Seventies and Eighties, was described as "the Colossus" and yet he weighed just 12st 7lb. Rugby players now are usually at least two to

three stones heavier and it is not uncommon for internationals to be 18 stone or more. It's not just rugby players who are getting bigger either. Everyone is! Children are noticeably taller than they were in the Sixties. It is now not uncommon for children, both girls and boys, to tower over their parents.

What has this got to do with athletics? This article aims to point to the real reason for the decline in the standards of distance running in the UK and other Western countries since the Seventies. Having a big body is not an advantage to a distance runner. A 12st man will never win the Olympic marathon. Having excess fat is an even worse.

Endless reasons are given for the decrease in general running standards in the UK: not enough miles over a sufficient period of time, computer games, fast food, Western affluence making runners less hungry for success.

I disagree with all of these views. Whatever is causing people to be fatter and bigger is also making it more difficult for young Westerners to be world-class distance runners. The cause? Undoubtedly, in my opinion, the reason for our changing physiques is environmental pollution.

Among the main suspects are

chemicals known as Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs). The endocrine system controls the secretion of hormones into the body. Hormones are substances that among other things regulate growth and development. EDCs alter the normal functioning of this vital bodily system.

We can't escape EDCs. Wastewater pumped into our rivers for re-use in the water supply contains them. The EDCs in this wastewater originate not only in natural hormones that people secrete but also contraceptive pill hormones, medicines, detergents, pesticides, flame retardants, chemicals in cosmetics and all manner of plastics. In addition to EDCs in wastewater vast quantities of EDC-bearing fertilisers are also washed into our rivers from farm land.

There have been many well-researched cases of the feminisation of the reproductive organs of male fish in rivers containing EDCs, while modern Western men are also showing a dramatic decrease in their sperm count. EDCs are also known to affect mood and I would look to this type of pollution as a reason for the vast increase in attention deficit disorder among youngsters.

Many of the pollutants in our drinking water are oestrogen-imitating chemicals. Oestrogen is not only a growth hormone; it is also the hormone that helps to stimulate the growth of fat cells in women.

When we are looking at a phenomenon that seems to be affecting nearly everyone then I think we need to look at universal factors beyond an individual's control. It is most unlikely that everyone simultaneously has stopped exercising and started eating unhealthily. And I strongly disagree that there are not enough young British runners training sufficiently hard. The really naturally talented runners usually come through with a much lighter training load than a more established international runner.

Oestrogen-imitating chemicals are not only affecting men but increased fat levels are making it more difficult for fully matured young females to progress in athletics – in sprints and distance running. Females now need to look at not only the discipline of hard training but also to the controlled diets of stars such as Paula Radcliffe. Africans are brought up in a relatively pollution-free environment and so far have not been affected by these chemical agents.

Of course it does seem that more youngsters are sitting around watching TV and playing video games. But what I say is that the lack of desire to exercise is a result of young people finding it very difficult to avoid putting on weight because of EDCs. More research needs to be done but in the meantime we can only sit back and admire African distance runners and hope that the Western world will eventually take action to clean up its water supply.

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