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**Race to the Top:  
Marathon Participation, Leisure Credentials & Meritocracy**

**Introduction**

If an activity involves blisters, cramps, chaffing, nausea, and light-headedness, requires four months of training, and a \$100 entry fee for the privilege of this experience, can we still describe it as "leisure?" And regardless of how we define it, how do we understand why anyone would seek out this experience? This paper raises these questions in relation to the significant increase in marathon participation over the past quarter century—from 25,000 U.S. marathon finishers in 1976 to 334,000 in 2003 ("USA Marathoning;" "Road Runners").<sup>1</sup> The marathon, a 26.2 mile running event, emphasizes personal goal attainment and makes an extreme athletic experience available to non-professional runners and self-described "non-runners," but its rise in popularity as a democratic and participatory sport also has implications for discourses of achievement and the reproduction of social hierarchies. Demographic data indicates that marathon runners are predominately college graduates in their twenties and thirties ("New York"). To understand why so many young college-educated women and men devote so much time to training for marathons (marathon training schedules usually require six to twelve hours per week for twelve to sixteen weeks), I interviewed fifteen marathon finishers, potential marathon participants, and friends of marathon runners. While these interviewees revealed different personal reasons for running marathons, they all described marathon participation as a

mark of distinction within their social networks and when meeting new people. In this way, marathon participation serves as a “leisure credential” separate from any specific improvements to physical fitness.

To explore the social implications of this pursuit of individual leisure credentials, this essay draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. Bourdieu’s work on sports and leisure foregrounds the spatial and subjective aspects of distinction, emphasizing the social “fields” (i.e., structured systems of class positions) within which different individuals choose leisure practices—“choices” that according to Bourdieu are largely structured by social class stratification, and in turn, reproduce this stratification. In Bourdieu’s theory, day-to-day leisure practices represent an important aspect of hierarchical status competitions, in which different social classes struggle to define the value of, and monopolize access to, different cultural objects and practices. Yet, Bourdieu’s writing on leisure has less to say about social actors who are aware of the profits to be gained by investing in different leisure practices within mobile social networks that have rapidly changing notions of “distinction.” Therefore, by expanding on Bourdieu’s theory, this essay (following Erickson 1996) attempts to provide a more complete picture of how, where, and by whom status positions are contested and reproduced by emphasizing social networks and the temporal context of distinction, namely, the specific socio-historical context in which new distinctions, such as marathon participation as a leisure credential, emerge. In this case, given the disproportionate percentage of marathon runners who hold college and graduates degrees, examining the specific temporal context of distinction means considering the marathon as a leisure credential in relation to the increased competition in the market for educational credentials—i.e., degrees from “prestigious” institutions—since the 1980s. As this essay argues, educational credentials present an important point of comparison to

leisure credentials because marathon participation, similar to college admissions, foregrounds individual agency in competition and achievement while obscuring the barriers different individuals and groups face in attaining these credentials.

This essay begins, therefore, with a brief history of the marathon as a sporting event before considering the individual marathon experiences described in the interviews. The importance of social networks, a recurring theme in the interviews, frames my discussion of the research findings, and provides a basis from which to consider the social implications of the emergence of marathon participation as a leisure credential. Finally, by building on Bourdieu's theory of social distinction in leisure practices, and by examining the marathon in comparison to the concurrent increase in competition for educational credentials, this essay argues that the increase in marathon participation among young college graduates can be understood as a way of using leisure practices to extend one's educational credentials, and as part of an ideology of meritocracy with implications for the reproduction of social hierarchies.

### **Historical and Contemporary Stories of the Marathon**

The first marathon was held in 1896 at the first modern Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. The race re-created and commemorated the run of Pheidippides, a Greek messenger who, according to legend, ran from the battle of Marathon to Athens to deliver news of the Greek victory over the Persians. Pheidippides delivered his message: "Rejoice, we conquer," then promptly died (Lyons xiii.). Over the past quarter century, as the marathon has attracted more participants hoping to finish, not win, the race, commentators have given the legend of the marathon a new spin, emphasizing the egalitarian uniformity of the event. Historian Pamela Cooper, who's *The American Marathon* (1998) is the only comprehensive social history of the

marathon, writes that “almost all marathoners look very much alike in their sneakers, plastic watches, and nylon shorts” (180; among the small body of scholarship on the marathon, see also: Gregson and Huggins 2001; Hauman 1996; Kislevitz 1998). George Sheehan, a marathon runner and author of several books on running, also emphasizes the greatness of the women and men who participate: “The marathon is a theater for heroism, the common man and an uncommon challenge. [It shows] the extraordinary powers of ordinary people” (Kislevitz 12).

The story of the contemporary marathon, then, is that of a level playing field where everyone has a chance to transcend everyday life. In many respects, demographic data from the recent increase in marathon participation supports this portrayal. In the 270 marathons that took place in the U.S. in 2003, the total number of marathon finishers reached 334,000, almost twice as many as ten years earlier, and more than thirteen times the number of participants at the peak of the “marathon boom” of the mid-1970s (Cooper 140). Moreover, almost forty percent of marathon finishers in 2003 were women (up from ten percent in 1980), and a growing number of participants are over fifty years-old (“USA Marathoning,” “Road Runners”). Indeed, anyone who has watched a marathon can testify that the marathon is fair in the most brutal sense—everyone suffers. In this sense, the rhetoric of the contemporary marathon as the ultimate democratic sport is valid; runners *do* look very similar in competition.

Yet, a cursory glance around the starting line reveals that the majority of runners are white, and available demographic data on runners’ income and education further indicates that marathon participants are not a representative sample of Americans. For example, the median household income of the 33,000 participants in the 2003 Chicago Marathon (the second largest U.S. marathon) was approximately \$75,000 (compared to \$62,700 for the median U.S. four-person household), and ninety percent of runners in the 2004 New York Marathon (the largest

U.S. marathon) hold at least a college degree (compared to twenty-six percent among total U.S. citizens over twenty-five years-old) (“Kappitt interview;” “New York;” “Census”).<sup>2</sup> While this demographic data provides an answer to the question of who is leading the increase in marathon participation—marathon runners are predominately white, college graduates in their twenties and thirties—the question remains, why are these specific individuals, is this specific group, dedicating their leisure time to the marathon?

To gain insight into this question, I interviewed fifteen marathon finishers, potential marathon participants, and friends of marathon runners, all of whom were also young college graduates.<sup>3</sup> After interviewing only a few participants, I quickly discovered that people are drawn to the marathon for a number of different personal reasons. Some interviewees cited weight loss as their primary goal, others intended to raise money for charity, and one was dared into running by a friend. Some hated training for the marathon, while others loved it despite the demands it placed on their time. In many ways, these interviews echoed those collected in running publications such as *First Marathon: Personal Encounters with the 26.2-Mile Monster* (1998), so in truth, I should not have been surprised that my interviews prompted a variety of individual responses.

Despite the unique details in each interview, however, a number of similar themes emerged. Everyone I talked to was “introduced” to the marathon as a participatory event by the experience of an acquaintance, friend, or family member, and this personal introduction subsequently made the marathon more “attainable,” or made it “seem more doable.” Many interviewees also emphasized that the marathon was a “huge personal accomplishment,” or a way to “test your limits,” and similarly, many recounted the respect accorded marathon runners within their peer groups for having accomplished this goal. In sum, these interviewees

consistently described the marathon as a significant, yet attainable, individual achievement that serves as a leisure credential within their existing social networks and when meeting new people. However, the largely similar social class status of marathon runners suggests that access to different social networks also restricts access to the marathon, making it a less egalitarian leisure activity than suggested by the “marathon runner as everyday hero” rhetoric described above. As a recurring theme in the interviews, the importance of social networks in introducing individuals to the marathon, and in assigning value to the event as a leisure credential, therefore frames the following discussion of the research findings.

### **The Marathon as a Participatory Event**

At the most basic level, you cannot participate in something that you do not know about. While many Americans, especially those that live in a city that hosts a marathon, are aware of the race, the number of people for whom the marathon exists as a participatory event, either personally or indirectly through the experiences of family, friends, or co-workers, is far smaller. Being introduced to the “idea” of the marathon—the knowledge that average athletes and even self-described non-athletes finish marathons—is therefore an essential step in choosing to participate. Each interviewee discussed a personal introduction to the accessibility of marathon through their social networks, and this recurrence merits a brief overview of some of these anecdotes:<sup>4</sup>

Cathy: (32, completed four marathons)

I thought there’s no way I could ever run a marathon, I didn’t run in college, I didn’t run in high school, I just thought it was so ambitious and

such a hard undertaking, and [a med school classmate], she sort of, she made it seem like it was manageable.

Julia: (35, no plans to run a marathon, has friends who have run marathons)

I'm sure [my college neighbor] trained for a few months, but it wasn't like years and years of dedication went into it. And he was just a normal, you know, not especially athletic person...kind of like me in that respect, although he was probably a lot fitter than I was or am, but he wasn't in a profoundly different category, he wasn't like an athlete in some other sport.

Julie: (22, no plans to run a marathon, friend recently ran a marathon)

I guess I had a perception that you had to be a complete crazy person, like really obsessed with training to run a marathon, but like my friend can do it, so I could do it if I really, really wanted to...like my friend can do it, so I can do it too.

Meg: (23, training for a marathon, friend ran a marathon)

My roommate in college ran a marathon...it seemed more doable, because...I think when most people think of marathon runners, it's almost like their ultra-marathoners or like 'Iron-Man' or something, it's not something an ordinary person can do, like you have to be an athlete, or you have to devote your whole sort of lifestyle to it.

I quote these examples at length, because they illustrate how social networks introduce individuals to the marathon as a participatory event. Interviewees cited siblings, friends, and college/work acquaintances, but in each instance, it was this personal knowledge which put a

face to the marathon and made it more attainable. It is, of course, impossible to determine what role personal myth-making plays in each person's marathon story, but it is telling that two interviewees, who expressed no personal interest in running a marathon, still viewed it as something they could do based on their friends' experiences. As these examples suggest, through their individual marathon experiences and stories, runners often serve as promoters for the marathon, recruiting family, friends, and co-workers who would not have previously considered running a marathon. Personal knowledge of someone who has run a marathon functions, in this way, as an *invitation* to run the marathon. Certainly not everyone chooses to accept the invitation, and some first-time runners are surely intrigued by the anonymous marathon competitors they see or hear about. Nonetheless, knowledge of the accessibility of the marathon as a participatory event, spread among social networks of peers and acquaintances, is important to the increase in marathon participation and to the largely similar economic and educational status of marathon runners.

Another factor that restricts access to the marathon as a participatory event is the ability to prioritize training time. Marathons are not free—entry fees range from twenty-five to one-hundred dollars, basic running shoes cost fifty to seventy-five dollars, and many runners travel to other cities (or countries) to run. As expensive as this is, the monetary cost of the marathon is secondary to the time most runners devote to training. Marathon guides recommend training schedules that require six to twelve hours of running per week for twelve to sixteen weeks, and most schedules advocate running four to six days a week with long runs of one to three hours one day a week. The runners I interviewed confirmed what these numbers suggest: that training for the marathon was often more difficult than the marathon itself. After running alone for four months, five to six days a week, one runner summarized: “the marathon is really like a



celebration of all of the work you've put into training, because that's the part that is really killer" ("Theresa"). Similarly, when I asked another runner if he would run another marathon, he paused before telling me:

If it was just one day of pain then I would probably do it again, but its really like a few months of solid training, and those long runs that you do in training, you have to set aside a whole afternoon and run, there's no one cheering you, there's no drink stations, there's no friends to help you along, it just like you out there by yourself ("Graeme").

Others enjoyed the training, but acknowledged that it "took over my life" or that "I have no social life...well running is my social life" ("Lisa;" "Cathy").

When I asked the runners how they made time for training in their schedules, several of them suggested that the flexibility of their school/work schedules and the ability to prioritize training time were essential to their marathon participation. "I think I'm very fortunate to be a student," one runner told me, "if you're going to do a long run, you have to wake up that many hours before going to work, but with grad school I have more flexibility" ("Hilliary"). Another participant also liked the flexibility of graduate school, because "if you want to take off in the afternoon and go for a long run you can, and you can do your work at night" ("Graeme").

Conversely, a runner who used her company's lunch hour to train for her first marathon, worried that the lack of structured time in school would make training more difficult ("Theresa"). Of the people I interviewed, all but one was a student, only two were married, and none had children, so the scope of this time prioritization would differ for runners who have less flexible work schedules and/or are parents. In every case, however, marathon runners have to reorder some

aspects of their lives to prioritize time for training—a task that was relatively easier for the runners I talked to who had flexible schedules and few familial obligations.

This ability to dedicate one's "leisure" time to the "work" of training for the marathon underlies the gender and occupational barriers to marathon participation. For example, one of the interviewees connected the ability to control one's schedule to the time pressures faced by female runners who are also parents. When asked why she mentioned that she always pictures marathon runners as men, even though all of the runners she knows are women, she said:

Running has sort of always been dominated by men. Women are starting to make progress now, but...what I've noticed about some running families is that Mom has to get everything together, and things flare up, and it seems like men can protect their running time better ("Meg").<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, while women are among the fastest growing group of marathon runners, participation is significantly lower among married women and mothers than among married men and fathers ("New York").

In addition to these gender and family dynamics, occupation also influences access to marathon training. The majority of marathon runners hold professional/managerial jobs that do not require physical labor and which allow runners to dedicate their leisure time to the "work" of marathon training ("New York"). Therefore, in addition to the social networks that "invite" individuals to the marathon, the ability to reprioritize one's life to take on the "work" of training also determines access to the marathon. Thus, despite the rise in popularity of the marathon as a participatory sport, access to the marathon starting line is not democratically available.

## **The Marathon as Leisure Credential**

Nevertheless, for the increasing number of individuals who participate in marathons—those that know the marathon is accessible to runners of all abilities and have the time to train—the question remains, why run the marathon? Given the limited access to marathon participation described above, as well as the requisite investment of training time and physical pain, it is not surprising that runners view the marathon as a distinctive personal accomplishment; yet how runners describe this achievement, and how runners' social networks view this achievement, are central to understanding marathon participation. Through the interviews, a picture emerges of the marathon as a leisure credential, that is, a clearly defined test of self with significant and easily graspable meaning for both runners and non-runners. This section will examine how the value placed on the marathon within and across social networks motivates participation.

Implicit in the interviewees' understanding of the marathon as a participatory event, is the belief that the marathon is not only doable, but worth doing. The interviewees consistently described the marathon as a significant personal goal, detaching the race from its specific athletic definition as a long distance running event, and redefining it as a personal test that happens to take the form of a 26.2 mile footrace. The perceived magnitude of this personal test reappeared throughout the interviews. One runner stressed that the marathon was all about “testing yourself, like taking on something that is really difficult, and then overcoming it” (“Cathy”). Another runner described pushing her body's limitations:

[In training] you feel more conscious of what your body can do, I feel like that's the cool thing about marathons, I mean we have limitations but you don't know what they are until you push them, and a marathon totally does, so you learn about yourself in that way (“Theresa”).

In addition to discovering one's physical limits, other runners discussed the marathon as a definable achievement, comparing it to scholastic accomplishments such as writing a thesis, getting into law school, or getting a Ph.D. ("Meg;" "Heidi"). Described in this way, the marathon functions as a leisure credential that certifies more than running 26.2 miles or being in good shape, it also (and primarily) becomes a clearly defined marker of dedication and achievement.

Of course, the marathon is only a positive credential if others assign a similar value to the accomplishment. Here again, the mystique of the marathon is important. One of the interviewees, who is not interested in running the marathon herself, admitted: "I can locate more respect in my head for people who run marathons than people who just, you know, run a lot...its in the same category as like swimming the English Channel, you know, it has a shape, it has a theme, its just got more meaning" ("Julia"). While this may represent an extreme case, runners recounted similar expressions of admiration from non-runners. Describing the reaction when people find out she has run a marathon, one runner recalled: "They are always a little like: 'How could you do that? I can't believe it; it's amazing that you can do that'" ("Cathy"). Another participant appreciated the positive reception of her friends:

They were always like very enthusiastic, they were like 'that's so awesome'...and I think its definitely non-runners have this idea that a marathon is like an Olympic event, and I guess, well it is, but that its just *so* hard to do, and its just like impossible, and you have to be this like, fine specimen of an athlete to do it...so there reaction was always kind of funny, because they would just be so like impressed, like oh my god, you're amazing...so that was kind of cool too ("Lisa").

Another runner recounted that people often told him, “‘good for you, I could never do that’” (“Joe”). Although these examples run counter to the understanding of the contemporary marathon as a participatory event, in each of these cases, the mystique of the marathon defines and elevates it beyond the scope an athletic event, increasing the perceived value of the achievement. In short, the respect accorded to the marathon within and across social networks helps to define the event as a leisure credential.

In addition to garnering the admiration of non-running friends, and encouraging positive first-impressions when meeting new people, marathon participation also serves a function of social cohesion within certain peer networks. “A lot of people have run marathons, more than you think” explained one runner, later adding “I wanted to join that elite group of people who have run marathons” (“Theresa”). Another marathoner described the influence of her co-workers: “there are ten people in my lab, and eight of them have run marathons, so I think there’s something with being an overachiever, and I thought I want to be part of that” (“Hilliary”). Another runner was surprised to learn how many of his acquaintances had run marathons:

Something I didn’t notice about marathons until I trained for it, is a lot of people do them. Actually I went to a Halloween party the other night and like half the people sitting around the table had done one. And someone who ran the half-marathon with me, said like how was it, and we were talking, and gradually everyone was like, ‘oh, you know when I did it, this happened,’ and it was crazy to realize that many people had done one or had thought about doing one before (“Graeme”).

Here again, given the social networks that invite people to marathons, it is not surprising that clusters of marathon runners would form within peer groups, and that the desire to join these clusters would motivate individuals to participate in marathons.

In sum, the experiences of these interviewees highlight the role of social networks in inviting marathon participation and in defining the marathon as a leisure credential with value apart from and beyond any specific improvements to physical fitness. However, as a culturally valued leisure credential held predominately by college graduates, marathon participation fosters both social cohesion within certain social networks as well as social exclusion for those without access to these select networks (on social inclusion and exclusion in sports and leisure, see also: Dyreson 2001; Gregson and Huggins 2001; Gruneau 1983; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Light and Kirk 2000; and Pronger 1998). Moreover, given its emphasis on individual goal attainment in a seemingly equal and meritocratic competition, the social implications of marathon participation as a leisure credential extend to other discourses of achievement and the reproduction of social hierarchies, which this essay will consider through Bourdieu's work on social distinction and leisure practices.

### **Leisure Credentials, Distinction & Social Networks**

Bourdieu's theory of distinction is useful to the study of leisure in general, and this analysis of marathon participation in particular, because he examines the processes by which seemingly natural individual tastes and practices are largely produced by social class stratification, and in turn, reproduce this stratification. Bourdieu links the everyday social practices and perceptions of individuals to competitions among and within different social classes for hierarchical social distinctions. For Bourdieu, different social classes have access to

different resources or types of “capital” (e.g., economic, political, as well as access to a system of symbols and knowledge that function as cultural capital). These resources can be accumulated, converted to different forms (e.g., economic capital converted to cultural capital through education), and passed from generation to generation, thereby sustaining an unequal distribution of resources. Social classes invest these resources in different “fields” (i.e., structured systems of class positions such as art, law, business, and education, all of which relate to an overarching “field of power”), and compete to achieve distinction and affirm their position in that field. However, as social groups affirm, or seek recognition for their position, they also affirm the positions of other groups; and since resources are unevenly distributed from the start, social groups have different abilities to classify the hierarchy, thus reproducing relations of power among groups.

Central to his theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu argues that an individual’s everyday lifestyle practices and consumption decisions are largely determined during the early stages of life by family, schooling, and the internalization of a given set of material conditions tied to social class position. Bourdieu terms this system of dispositions the “habitus,” and suggests that it organizes and harmonizes an individual’s practices across all social settings. Moreover, the habitus, which operates largely below the level of consciousness, shapes the classificatory system (i.e., high/low, distinguished/vulgar) that the individual applies to different situations. As such, Bourdieu describes the habitus as a “structured and structuring structure,” that is, an individual’s selected objects and practices are structured by their background, while the classificatory scheme the individual uses to judge, organize, and harmonize these choices is both structured by their background and serves as the basis for structuring that individual’s perception of the social world and of their habitus in relation to others, thereby reproducing the

system of class positions (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 170). Therefore, since the logic of the habitus is largely produced by the starting resources tied to social class, and those with more resources have the ability to determine the norms of classification in different fields in a way that privileges their class position, individuals reproduce social inequalities in their minute everyday (inter)actions.<sup>6</sup>

Bourdieu's work on sports and leisure foregrounds the spatial and subjective aspects of distinction, emphasizing the social "fields" (e.g., structured spaces for social relations that in this context include schools, workplaces, health clubs, private country clubs, and sports fields themselves) within which different social actors choose leisure practices. Summarized by sociologists Grant Jarvie and Joseph Maguire (1994), Bourdieu's study of sport argues that:

Different classes, gender and ethnic groups do not 'agree' on the profits (physical, cultural and symbolic) expected from sport. Different classes derive different types of profit from sport in terms of health, slimness, relaxation and social relationships. Though some sports are practiced by all classes, e.g. golf, both the setting and actual practice itself involves different bodily dispositions and different expectations of returns on type and volume of cultural, symbolic and economic capital invested. Just as there is a 'universe of class bodies and bodily practices' so too is there a 'universe of sporting bodies.' The task is to map out these on to the social space (197).

According to Bourdieu, social classes struggle over the legitimate way to practice leisure and over the power to define culturally valued leisure activities. These competitions are both structured by and reproduce social class lines, meaning that access to culturally valued leisure practices, and the power to define these valued practices, are restricted to those classes with more



economic and cultural capital. For Bourdieu, individuals encounter this structured system of social positions in each of their leisure choices:

The universe of sporting activities and entertainments presents itself to each new entrant as a set of ready-made choices, objectively instituted possibles, traditions, rules, values, equipment, symbols which receive their social significance from the system they constitute and which derive the proportion of their properties, at each moment, from history (*Distinction* 209).

Yet, as with other social fields, the way in which each individual perceives the field of leisure choices and selects leisure practices is largely determined by their habitus:

Of course, at every moment each new entrant must take account of a determinate state of the division of sporting activities and entertainments and their distribution among the social classes, a state which he cannot alter and which is the result of the whole previous history of the struggles and competition among the agents and institutions engaged in the ‘sporting field.’ But while it is true that, here as elsewhere, the field of production helps to produce the need for its own products, none the less the logic whereby agents incline toward this or that sporting practice cannot be understood unless their dispositions towards sport, which are themselves one dimension of a particular relation to the body, are reinserted into the unity of the system of disposition, the habitus, which is the basis from which lifestyles are generated (“Sportsman” 127).

As both a structured and structuring classificatory scheme, therefore, the habitus selects and/or rejects leisure practices based on their “fit” with the values of an individual’s social class. In the

following passage, Bourdieu outlines the struggles for status and distinction that underlie these seemingly “natural” cultural preferences for sporting activities among different social classes:

The most typically popular sports, football and rugby, wrestling and boxing [...] combine all the features which repel the dominant class: not only the social composition of their public, which redoubles their commonness, but also the values and virtues demanded, strength, endurance, violence, ‘sacrifice,’ docility and submission to collective discipline—so contrary to bourgeois ‘role distance’—and the exaltation of competition. [...] [In contrast] all of the features which appeal to the dominant taste are combined in sports such as golf, tennis, sailing, riding (or show-jumping), skiing (especially its most distinctive forms, such as cross-country) or fencing. Practiced in exclusive places (private clubs), at the time one chooses, along or with chosen partners (features which contrast with the collective discipline, obligatory rhythms and imposed efforts of teams sports), demanding a relatively low physical exertion that is in any case freely determined, but a relatively high investment—and the earlier it is put in, the more profitable it is—of time and learning (so that they are relatively independent of variations in bodily capital and its decline through age), they only give rise to highly ritualized competitions, governed, beyond the rules, by the unwritten laws of fair play (*Distinction* 214-7).

In highlighting the constant struggle among social classes over access to, and the power to define the cultural value of, leisure activities, Bourdieu rejects viewing leisure practices as either fully structured or voluntary (Jarvie 194). That is, Bourdieu’s theory identifies an individual’s day-to-day leisure practices as a blend of conscious actions and unconscious tastes, thereby linking

these everyday choices to structured social class practices, opportunities, and constraints (regarding structure versus agency in Bourdieu, see also: Alexander 1995; Bohman 1999; Bouveresse 1999; Butler 1999; Calhoun 2004; Erickson 1996; Featherstone 1987; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Taylor 1993; Wacquant 1989).<sup>7</sup> Yet, with its emphasis on the spatial and subjective aspects of leisure practices, Bourdieu's theory is less well equipped to describe the temporal contexts in which distinctions emerge or expand. For example, while Bourdieu suggests that jogging fits with the occupational concerns with self-presentation and body-maintenance among upwardly mobile individuals (Featherstone 126), Bourdieu's theory must be expanded in order to understand how the significance of jogging—which has experienced several intermittent “running booms” since its initial gentrification in the 1970s (Gregson and Huggins 32)—differs from the emergence of marathon participation as a leisure credential among college graduates. In sum, Bourdieu's writing on leisure has little to say about social actors who are aware of the profits to be gained by investing in different leisure practices within mobile social networks that have rapidly changing notions of “distinction.”

This critique of Bourdieu follows sociologist Bonnie Erickson's (1996) suggestion that social networks, more so than parents' class status, deserve a central role in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (see also “life course” critique offered by Featherstone 1987). After suggesting that for Bourdieu, “family is destiny,” Erickson writes that:

Family is *not* destiny, however, in a rapidly changing society in which class structures and cultural possibilities both change considerably within one generation, so that the parents' cultural framework seems out of date, nor is it destiny in a society in which children gain massive cultural infusions from schooling that is longer and more important to life chances than their parents'

educations. Neither is culture as immune to conscious manipulations as Bourdieu implies. Major life transitions, especially the transition to adulthood, can shake up old assumptions and offer a ‘fresh encounter’ with a range of new choices (223).

In questioning the lifelong influence of parents’ class, Erickson offers a revised view of how individuals navigate social interactions and structures. For Bourdieu, when actors with similar backgrounds encounter each other, similarities in their respective systems of perception produce a “fit,” or as Bourdieu notes in an interview, “when the habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself ‘as a fish in water,’ it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted” (Wacquant 43). Bourdieu however is vague regarding how an individual recognizes and classifies an individual, group, or object that is the product of a different habitus.

In contrast, Erickson’s emphasis on social networks provides an angle from which to consider how an individual reacts to being a “fish out of water:”

From the individual’s point of view, it follows that the most useful cultural resource is a little working knowledge of a lot of cultural genres combined with a good understanding of which culture to use in which context. Equipped with cultural variety and the rules of relevance, a person can navigate successfully in many settings; equipped with vast amounts of high culture alone, a person would be shipwrecked in many social seas. Cultural variety does not come primarily from class, or any other single kind of attribute or social location, wince each of these is related to just some forms of culture. Instead, the most powerful single teacher of cultural variety is contact with people in many different locations:

network variety builds cultural variety. Advantaged people, including higher-class people, will certainly have better cultural resources, but this is not because of their class as such but because of the diverse networks that advantaged people have (224).

While Erickson's research focuses on the private security industry, her critique of Bourdieu is also useful in the context of leisure practices, and the emergence of the marathon as a leisure credential, for two reasons: 1) by emphasizing the cultural advantages of social network variety, Erickson (following Granovetter 1973) explicates the significance of the social networks which interviewees described as important to their access to, and valuation of, marathon participation; and similarly 2) by foregrounding the fluidity of status competitions in mobile societies, Erickson (following Peterson 1992, 1997; DiMaggio 1987; Holt 1997) provides a way to understand the popularity of the marathon as a clearly defined credential of achievement that serves as a "useful cultural resource" in interactions across diverse social networks. Building on the later point, this essay will conclude by considering the emergence of marathon participation as a leisure credential in relation to, and as an extension of, the increased competition for educational credentials.

### **Leisure Credentials as an Extension of Educational Credentials**

Following Erickson's analysis of the cultural resources privileged in mobile social networks, this section will consider the specific socio-historical context of the emergence of marathon participation as a marker of distinction held disproportionately by college graduates. To be sure, college graduates cannot be said to comprise a single like-minded social class, nor is an interest in marathon running represented by every member of this demographic or limited

exclusively to those within this demographic. However, while the opportunities and constraints that college graduates face are not monolithic, the increased competition in the market for educational credentials since the 1980s represents a shared experience (however varied) among young college graduates. Moreover, the praise for individual agency in competition and achievement in college admissions, and the privileging of certain “prestigious” degrees as highly valued educational credentials, makes educational competition an important point of comparison to marathon participation. Viewed in this light, the increase in marathon participation among young college graduates can therefore be understood as a way of using leisure credentials to extend one’s educational credentials, and as part of an ideology of meritocracy with implications for the reproduction of social hierarchies.

A brief overview of the development of meritocratic competition in college admissions will illuminate the connection between college and graduate degrees as educational credentials and marathon participation as a leisure credential. In their study of the increased competition and consumerization of higher education since World War II, historians Elizabeth Duffy and Idana Goldberg (1998) detail the economic shifts that made college education a pre-requisite in many fields, as well as the admissions and financial aid initiatives that made college accessible to more students. As Duffy and Goldberg describe, this diffusion of college education devalued college degrees in economic and social terms, and shifted emphasis among graduates and potential students from having *a* college degree, to having a *certain* degree or number of degrees. At the same time, the competition among colleges to recruit, enroll, and educate the “best” students based on quantifiable “metrics of merit” (e.g., standardized tests and class rank), stratified institutions into “more selective” and “less selective” tiers, with students and parents placing more emphasis on “name-brand” educational credentials.

Initially published in 1983, *U.S. News & World Report's* annual college and graduate school rankings (and the cottage industry of similar rankings, reviews, and guides that followed) contributed to the stratification of institutions. Initially a subjective survey of the opinions of college presidents, *U.S. News* added “objective” data in 1988, ranking colleges based on “student selectivity,” a composite of the acceptance rate, mean standardized test scores, and high school rankings of enrolled students (Duffy and Goldberg 70). In addition to fueling intense competition among both students and colleges, and cementing the hierarchy of colleges, the measures selected for the magazine’s rankings reinforced a set of quantifiable “measures of merit” in college admissions (232; on college admissions, educational credentials, and meritocracy, see also: Brooks 2000; Kabaservice 1999; Labaree 1988, 1997; Lemann 1999; Steinberg 2002). As such, the increased competition and consumerization of educational credentials since the 1980s has reified the college admissions process as a functioning meritocratic system that proposes to identify and sort the “best and brightest” individuals within a hierarchy of more/less “prestigious” institutions

Writing on this competition for educational credentials, historian of education David Labaree describes its core ideology of meritocracy as a “social belief system modeled after market process” (Labaree 1988, 5). This ideology holds “that individual differences in ability, motivation, and character define varying degrees of individual worth or merit. Accordingly, those with the most merit should receive the largest share of social rewards, and it becomes society’s responsibility to guarantee that people get what they deserve” (23). Labaree argues that this ideology serves to justify the reproduction of social hierarchies through the meritocratic competition for educational credentials. Echoing Bourdieu (*State Nobility, Distinction*) Labaree suggests that educational credentials serve “as a kind of cultural currency that becomes attractive

to status groups seeking an advantage in the competition for social positions,” and social groups with more economic and cultural resources tend to benefit from this competition, “not because of an institutional correspondence principle that preordains such an outcome but because they are socially and culturally better equipped to gain access to and succeed within the educational market” (Labaree 1997, 254-5).

While Labaree addresses the social implications of the competition for educational credentials, the ideology of meritocracy is not limited to education. Indeed, marathon participation, like college admissions, foregrounds individual agency in competition and achievement, while obscuring the barriers different individuals and groups face in attaining these credentials. As argued in this essay, the ability to dedicate one’s leisure time to the “work” of marathon training limits the ability to participate, and access to select social networks both “invites” individuals to the marathon as a participatory event and provides knowledge of the marathon as valued leisure credential. Moreover, given the disproportionate percentage of marathon participants with college degrees, and the way the marathon figures as a leisure credential within the mobile social networks occupied by these college graduates, the increase in marathon participation among young college graduates can be understood as a way of using leisure practices to extend one’s educational credentials.

### **Conclusion: (Re)asserting Meritocracy**

Writing in a different context, media studies scholar Laurie Ouellette (2004) describes the emphasis on “lifestyle maximization, free choice, and personal responsibility” that defines “idealized” citizenship in neoliberal democracies. Drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governance, where the “free” market organizes social life, Ouellette writes:



[T]his diffused approach to the ‘regulation of conduct’ escapes association with a clear or top-down agenda, and is instead presented as the individual’s own desire to achieve optimum happiness and success [...] which means that those individuals who fail to thrive under neoliberal conditions can be readily cast as the ‘author of their own misfortunes’ (232-3).

Marathon participation might be seen as the winning side of Ouellette’s description of neo-liberalism. That is, and as this essay has attempted to illustrate, the emergence of marathon participation as a leisure credential, and as an extension of educational credentials among college graduates, (re)asserts an ideology of meritocracy that allows those who *succeed* to be cast as the “authors of their own *fortunes*,” and represents a view of individual responsibility that is no less important to the neoliberal ideology and the reproduction of social hierarchies.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although marathon participation is not unique to the U.S. (eight of the fifteen largest marathons are outside of the U.S.), the U.S. hosts the most total marathons, and U.S. residents represent the largest number of total marathon participants (“USA Marathoning;” “Road Runners”).

<sup>2</sup> Chicago Marathon 2003 household income estimate based on phone interview with the Director of National Promotions at Burger King Corporation, a corporate sponsor of the race (“Kappitt interview”). Of runners in the New York Marathon 2004 that provided educational background information, ten percent had up to a high school degree, forty-three percent up to a college degree, and forty-seven percent up to a graduate degree(s) (“New York”). Although the age and family demographics of the marathon are not directly comparable to the total U.S. population (on average, marathon runners are younger and less likely to be parents), as points of reference the median income for a four-person family in the U.S. in 2002 was \$62,723 (“Census: Median”), and 26.5% of the total U.S. population (over 25-years old) have completed at least a bachelor’s degree (“Census: Education”).

<sup>3</sup> Interviews were conducted in Providence, RI during fall 2003. Interviewees were recruited via an e-mail solicitation of individuals in the Brown University community who 1) have run marathons, or are currently training for marathons; 2) would consider running a marathon in the future; or 3) are not personally interested in running a marathon, but have friends or family who have. Of the twenty-five respondents, fifteen participated in personal interviews that ranged in length from thirty minutes to an hour. Interviews followed an “open-ended” script in which interviewees were asked to discuss their own experiences with the marathon. Follow-up questions were asked to prompt/focus the interviewees where appropriate.

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- <sup>4</sup> The responses listed here were offered to the follow-up questions: “When did you first think of running a marathon?” “Have any of your friends or family run marathons?” “Have you ever been a spectator at a marathon?”
- <sup>5</sup> The majority of my interviewees were women, and like Meg, a number of them offered insightful comments about the gender dynamics of marathon running. The increased participation of women in the marathon and the significance of this participation are topics for further study. Among a large number of works related to gender and body issues in sports and leisure practices, see also: Miller 2001, MacNeill 1998 on workout videos, Cole 1998 on exercise addiction, and Pronger 1998 on “body McCarthyism.”
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Bourdieu argues that the material constraints of the working class produces a “taste of necessity” that selects objects and practices that are rejected by the dominant classes, and that the seeming “naturalness” of this process fuels class-based stereotypes and reproduces class stratification. Bourdieu writes:

Not content with lacking virtually all the knowledge or manners which are valued in the markets of academic examination or polite conversation nor with only possessing skills which have no value there, they are the people ‘who don’t know how to live,’ who sacrifice most to material foods, and to the heaviest, grossest and most fattening of them, bread, potatoes, fats, and the most vulgar, such as wine; who spend least on clothing and cosmetics, appearance and beauty; those who ‘don’t know how to relax,’ [...] who picnic beside major roads, cram their tents into overcrowded campsites, fling themselves into the prefabricated leisure activities designed for them by the engineers of cultural mass production; those who by all these uninspired ‘choices’ confirm class racism, if it needed to be

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confirmed, in its conviction that they only get what they deserve (*Distinction* 179).

<sup>7</sup> Illustrative of the critics who object that Bourdieu's theory of tastes gives insufficient account to agency, social theorist Jeffrey Alexander argues that: "It is very difficult to understand how a scientific theory that posits a determinate relation between subjective dispositions and objective structures—holding that the former reproduce the latter—can explain the critical ability to choose or reject structural positions in anything but an ad hoc and thoroughly residual way" (1995, 184-5). Alexander argues that Bourdieu therefore proposes an oxymoronic "unconscious rational actor." To my reading (influenced by Bohman 1999; Bouveresse 1999; Butler 1999; Calhoun 2004; Erickson 1996; Featherstone 1987; Jarvie and Maguire 1994; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Taylor 1993; Wacquant 1989) Bourdieu's theory is not determinist, nor is it strictly in line with rational choice theory. Individuals can still act counter to their habitus or pursue "non-rational" actions, but in the habitus, Bourdieu presents a combination of opportunities, constraints, and misrecognition that lead individual actors in directions that trend strongly to the reproduction of existing status positions.

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