

My Neighborhood Cheering Squad

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I am a road runner. Running on the open road (versus the 'mill, track, or elsewhere) certainly poses its advantages: scenery, good hills, a sense of childlike exploration. But I realized early on that sticking to the sidewalks isn't always a walk in the park: it does have its pitfalls. Among them? Extremes in temperature, reckless drivers, yipping dogs, and—perhaps most maddening of all—the catcalls.

When I first started my neighborhood running route, I was amazed by the abundance of hoots, hollers, and whoops that sailed through the air from street corners, car windows, and construction sites. Mind you, I am no traffic-stopper—just your average twentysomething, 120-pound woman. I can safely make my way through a crowded mall or a party without eliciting mating calls. But strangely, the minute I hit the road for my morning run, the testosterone flew.

“Yo, baby!” a ponytailed truck driver jeered from his 10-wheeler. “Don't lose *too* much of that!”

Teenage boys at the bustop, perhaps emboldened by my quick passage, whistled and snickered as I blew by.

“Where's the fire, sweet thing?” wondered the bawdy hotdog vendor on the corner.

And then, perhaps the scariest and most infuriating of all, were the honks. My heart rate is already galloping fast enough, thanks—I don't need any help from the trumpeting horn of a station wagon six inches from the curb.

After a couple of weeks of enduring such obnoxious behavior, I decided to fight back. Who did these guys think they were, anyway? Determined to thwart their lurid commentaries, I began dressing as dowdily and unattractively as possible for my runs. I shed the snug shorts in favor of

baggy pants, traded the tank top for a bulky pullover, and wore a hat to hide my ponytail, hoping to mask my gender altogether. Looking at my homely, androgynous self in the mirror before hitting the road, I felt confident that I wouldn't be bothered.

But, alas—the only effect of my camouflage was a whole lot of extra sweat. It was the same old story—three honks, four hoots, and one long, low whistle. I was honestly bewildered. What is it about a female runner, I wondered, that elicits such conduct?

One sunny Sunday morning, I was to find the answer. I set out for a five-miler, dressed in my usual slovenly getup. As I crossed a busy intersection, a skinny guy on a bench called out, “Lookin’ good!”

That was it. I'd had enough. I stopped, turned around, and walked back to the bench. The boy, a skinny redhead not a day over 18, was quiet and wide-eyed as I approached. Hands on my hips, I scowled at him. “What did you say?”

Eyes fixed on the curb, drained of the bravado of seconds before, the boy was at a loss for words. “I—I just meant—I don't know...”

“*Lookin’ good*, maybe?” I reminded him, glaring.

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Can I ask why?” I demanded. “I’m a complete stranger. And—well—*look* at me!” I blurted, gesturing down at my ensemble.

With a sudden resolve, the boy looked up at me. “Hey, take it as a compliment, okay? I mean, there’s nothing sexier than a physically fit woman.”

From that day on, I reinstated my regular running clothes, and I have adopted a new attitude toward catcalls. Now, instead of getting angry, I choose to regard those jeering boys and whistling men as my own personal cheering squad. I have found that, in moderation, they can actually be quite motivating—I’m a lot less likely to slack off when I know someone’s watching.

Today, when a truck driver calls out his approval of my form, I more often than not answer with a smile. And the hooting boys at the bus stop are greeted with

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