

# WOMEN'S RUNNING

EDITED BY SUSAN LINDFORS

## Most Myself by Jessa Vartanian

I am most myself when running—most human, most friendly, most approachable. With my hair stuffed into a faded baseball cap, ragged T-shirt and shorts covering my body and SPF 30 sunscreen my only makeup, all the barriers, props and attitudes of daily life are stripped away.

I do things I might not otherwise do. Like greeting everyone I pass—from gorgeous guys I usually find too intimidating to approach to homeless people I normally avoid making eye contact with.

I reveal things I don't usually reveal. Like the stomach I'm not so fond of. After 2 miles, I peel off my T-shirt, stuff it into the waistband of my shorts and run 6 more with my midriff blatantly exposed for all the world to see.

Unabashedly, I share intimate details of my bodily functions with running companions. If one of us accidentally passes a little you-know-what, we don't die of embarrassment. We say "excuse me" and keep running.

I also spit. It's not a terribly ladylike activity, but I feel a secret pride when said spit hangs together and soars a particularly long distance. It takes a certain talent.

Before I was even a teenager, the world began bombarding me with information on how to project my best image: what to wear, what to say, how to act. Browsing the fashion pages of *Teen* magazine, I subconsciously absorbed a cardinal truth: the world would, to a large extent, judge me by my appearance.

When I was 12, I became convinced that dangling trinkets from my earlobes would make me irresistible to the sixth-grade boys. After weeks of begging, Mom finally let me punch holes in them (my ears, not the boys).

Next, I decided my mosquito-bite breasts required support, so off we went to the Girl's Department at Macy's. The womanly delight I expected to feel that first Maidenform day was abruptly eclipsed by the suffocating pressure around my rib cage. All day I couldn't wait to unhook the clasp and take a deep breath.

As I grew, so did my beauty essentials. Eyebrows got plucked, legs shaved, hair highlighted, fingernails polished, under-eye circles concealed. Not to mention the control-top pantyhose and toe-crushing pumps (how silly I'd been to think bras were constricting).

For romantic occasions, I desperately hunted through the *Victoria's Secret* catalog

for lingerie. When the brown box arrived, I'd hurry into the house, shut the blinds, suit up and cautiously approach the mirror—always to discover an impostor staring back. Back I'd jump into my sweatpants and Bay to Breakers T-shirt.

All these adornments are supposed to make me look smart, attractive or sexy. While they sometimes do, they also distract me from who I am inside.

Running strips away the veneer, brings me back to the basics. With my legs striding powerfully forward, sweat-drenched ponytail rhythmically swatting my back, it's just me out there. No perfume. No WonderBra. Simply a woman with strong legs who knows how to spit, who isn't worried about the wind whipping her perfectly styled hair into a frenzy.

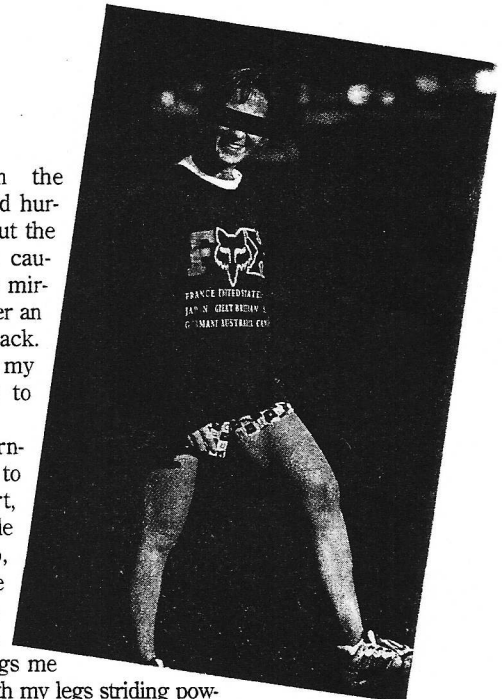
I feel real when I run.

Which is why I often put off showering for hours afterward. I meet friends for coffee, chat with neighbors, sing at the top of my lungs with the car windows rolled down. Raw, exposed, I may look like a *Glamour* "Don't," but I feel beautiful in a way that's missing when I'm all gussied up like a girl. And I'm in no rush to rinse that feeling down the drain.

Though I still get caught up with my appearance sometimes, my running self is always inside. With each mile I log, she gets stronger, reminding me of who I am and what I'm capable of, telling me not to take myself too seriously. She seeps into my nonrunning life.

Like last week at the grocery store. Instead of staring at the floor when I spotted a cute guy coming down the cereal aisle, I took my eyes off the Cheerios and said, "Hi!"—right to his face. How'd I get up the nerve? I imagined myself in baggy running shorts, halfway through a 10-mile run, bangs plastered to my temples with sweat. **R**

*Jessa Vartanian is a freelance writer living in San Jose, Calif., who runs, writes and showers every day—in that order.*



**Fashion forward:** While the author may look like a *Glamour* "Don't," she feels the most beautiful and comfortable this way.

MICHAEL JOHNSON