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Fitness

By CHRISTOPHER PERCY COLLIER

JEAN KNAACK couldn't keep a lid on it. While on a six-mile run near her home in Maryland, she raised her water bottle and expelled its contents onto the passenger-side window of a car.

Ms. Knaack, a 115-pound runner, had been jogging on the sidewalk when the vehicle had come within inches of hitting her. The driver had blindly pulled out of an adjacent parking lot, and Ms. Knaack responded with the aggressive squirt, coupled with a few choice expletives.

She did not anticipate what happened next.

The driver pulled the rest of the way out of the parking lot and into the street, whipped around in an intersection, got out of the car, and confronted her. Amid of flurry of profanities, the motorist threatened to strike her with a beer bottle. "The fact that he was so specific



G. PAUL BURNETT/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Road Runner Rage

ADRENALINE RUSH Runners and vehicles share the same patch of asphalt near Central Park at Columbus Circle.

really scared me," she said. "My heart rate shot sky high. I felt like I was going to pass out."

Even though Ms. Knaack was a seasoned runner — she's the executive director of the Road Runners Club of America — and is knowledgeable about proper training technique and nutrition, she never got the memo on what do when an angry or negligent motorist takes a workout sideways. That's because there really isn't one.

While road rage between cyclists and motorists has drawn some attention lately, adversity has long existed between runners and motorists "on a low level," says Brent Ayer, the head running coach at Hood College in Frederick, Md., who, years back, was pelted with a jelly doughnut while running.

Not that it's always the driver's fault. "I watch runners cut through intersections, cross in the middle of the street, and crowd cars," Mr. Ayer said. "We are not entirely blameless."

An estimated 41 million Americans are counted as runners, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, and public roads are often their best option. Wooded trails isolate runners, and treadmills are considered poor training tools if used exclusively in

preparation for a road race. Running around a track gets tedious.

But the thing about roads, of course, is that they also contain automobiles, driven, presumably, by any one of the nation's more than 202 million licensed drivers. And most runners don't have the good luck of participants in last Sunday's New York City Marathon, for whom police officers conveniently banned cars.

Runner gripes typically revolve around drivers going too fast or not paying close enough attention. Donna Kidder of Raleigh, N.C., gets particularly perturbed with "motorists who are chatting on a mobile phone and unaware of their surroundings, or drivers with their hands at 2 and 10 on the steering wheel, eyes focused directly in front of them, thinking they are driving safely, when in fact, they never see what is around them."

Other runners view the cause for many of these clashes as a result of a potentially flawed system — or perhaps a simple lack of awareness. "Runners are encouraged to run on the left side of the road, against traffic," said Sue Davies, a marathoner who has logged hundreds of miles in Connecticut as a member of Stony Corners Running Team,

"but about 90 percent of the time drivers taking a right turn don't bother to look right. I can't tell you how many times we've had drivers almost plow people down in our running group."

Drivers honk their horns. Runners yell back. Obscene hand gestures occasionally go up. Usually, it ends there.

Nothing ruins a good run quite like a ton of steel in your path.

But there are times when these seemingly minor altercations escalate.

In July, a jogger exercising in Stuart, Fla., was hit by a motorist driving a van. The driver then, for unknown reasons, proceeded to chase the runner while holding, in official police parlance, a foreign object.

In September, a runner in Annapolis, Md., was hit by a motorist, which brought about a yelling and a pushing match.

Police officers responded to an incident in April in Morris Plains, N.J., that

began when a driver entered a crosswalk and blocked a jogger's path. The runner retaliated, slamming his fist on the hood of the car, which prompted the driver to try to pin the runner against a parked car. The runner then reportedly struck the driver with his iPod — at which point the motorist reached into the back seat and pulled out a golf club.

It is a fact of physiology that adrenaline levels spike during exercise. But there is little research related to whether this elevated state predisposes athletes to aggressive outbursts if provoked. Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise who received a Ph.D. in physiology, suggested that that is unlikely. After all, "individuals are choosing between fight or flight," he said.

What is more, Steven Stosny of Germantown, Md., who developed a course on road rage that is used to help rehabilitate criminal offenders, sees a potentially alarming pitfall specific to runners who harbor the misperception that exercise relieves anger.

"It's O.K. to run as a way of getting extra energy out, but it won't take away the resentment," Dr. Stosny said. "You will still have these negative feelings, and you won't feel any less anger."

"If an obnoxious event happens and you're already 60 percent aroused, you may end up throwing something at a driver," Dr. Stosny said. "What you should really be thinking about is how healthy it is for you to be running."

Such advice may be helpful in considering when (or when not) to exercise. But what's a runner to do when a driver pulls out unexpectedly? "The startle response is neutral," Dr. Stosny said. "It clears your thoughts and perceptions. We train people to see it as free Starbucks. You're already pumping adrenaline and, with more energy, you'll run even more efficiently."

Kay Porter, a sports psychologist and runner who has worked with scores of United States Olympic athletes, suggested that such roadside disputes arise out of an almost instantaneous defense mechanism. "Fear is a very vulnerable response and people don't want to feel vulnerable, so it's converted to anger," Dr. Porter said. "And, as a runner, in general, you're totally vulnerable."

Dr. Stosny noted that heads butt between runners and drivers because both think "it's my road."

Changing this mind-set, for most runners, simply requires acknowledging the right for both parties to use public roads. "You have to remember the driver is another person," said Dr. Stosny, which is sometimes forgotten because of the enclosed nature of most vehicles.

Naturally, drivers have a different perspective than runners. Bonnie Sesolak, development director with the National Motorists Association, a drivers' rights group based in Madison, Wis., with 7,500 members, recalls a few close calls herself while driving to work on rural roads before the sun comes up.

"Runners are sometimes really hard to see," she said, "especially if they are not wearing bright clothing."

She also noted that it is often the driver who gets the bad rap when bodily harm is incurred, even if the runner is the one who was not fully attentive because of using headphones or some other distraction. "When an accident happens, it is usually the driver who is seen at fault," she said. Runners "have to realize that personal safety is their own responsibility," she said.

Of course, there are times when runners are glad drivers are around.

On one January day, Mr. Ayer of Hood College went out on what he thought would be an hour's run near dusk. He was underdressed and gradually realized that he was lost.

"I was wandering around in near dark, tempting hypothermia." Eventually, he spotted the headlights of an approaching motorist. In distress, he flagged the driver down. There was no verbal joust or physical struggle. He was simply offered a ride home.