**Dean Karnazes. *A Runner’s High: My Life in Motion.* New York: Harper Collins, 2021. 246 pp. Cloth, $27.99.**

Reviewed by William Steele, Ph.D., Professor of English, Lipscomb University

In his 2006 book *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner*, Dean Karnazes narrated what led him to become one of the most accomplished endurance runners in the world, detailing the races he ran on every continent, the countless hours he logged by himself, and the ways he motivated himself by setting, what would seem to be for most people, impossible goals.

His subsequent books focused more on specific races or goals he’d set and the lessons he’d learned from them. For example, *50/50: Secrets I Learned from Running 50 Marathons in 50 Days* takes readers through the journey of completing 26.2 miles of running, one marathon in each state, for fifty consecutive days.

In this latest book, *A Runner’s High: My Life in Motion*, Karnazes shares with readers a side of elite athletics rarely discussed so honestly: a career in decline and the accompanying emotions along the journey. In fact, the book opens with a description of a runner in distress rather than basking in the glow of another victory: “I’m laying catawampus splayed ass-to-the-dirt in the trail—one leg tweaked improbably beneath me—staring up at the afternoon sky seeing sparkles of light flickering before me like circling fireflies and wondering what the hell just happened” (p. 1).

Over the course of the next 23 chapters and conclusion, the runner known globally as “Ultramarathon Man” details his training and mental preparation for returning to the legendary Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, a race that had been his first 100-miler back in 1994. Now, in his mid-fifties, Karnazes’s interest in the race was rekindled. Though he would not be contending for the win, his primary motivation was the DNF (Did Not Finish) he had at the event in 2009, a race that, in his words, “thoroughly kicked my ass.” The result was that he “wanted—needed—redemption” (19).

While Karnazes has often been criticized for his self-promotion, he turns introspective in his latest book, detailing the similarities between his Herculean efforts on the running trail and life in general. For example, when describing the challenges of navigating the difficulties of running uphill at high elevation, he says, “These are the moments I live for. Perhaps no other sport holds a mirror to you the way running does. Running exposes your inner self with unvarnished brutality. How do you respond when the tide turns against you? What do you do when the going gets tough? It’s been said that without war we do not know if we are cowards or heroes. The runner knows this truth, for the runner has waged war” (p. 55).

Beyond just being a retelling of his return to Western States, Karnazes reflects on his running career, providing an honest glimpse at the challenges it presented him as a father, husband, and son while also showing how it allowed him to adapt to and overcome these obstacles. And though the primary event described is the Western States race, he does take readers back to some of the earlier events for which he is best known. Thankfully, he resists the urge to recycle the same stories from previous books, instead providing fresh anecdotes for those who have followed his career over the past three decades.

For those familiar with Karnazes’s career, this narrative provides a different twist on what one might expect. Instead of training to be the first to accomplish a goal (50 marathons in 50 states in 50 days, for example) or to win a major race, like he did with the Badwater Ultramarathon in 2004, *A Runner’s High* presents readers with a runner who is no longer the threat to win he once was. Throughout his retelling of his return to the Western States 100-miler, Karnazes is able to put his entire running career into perspective.

After finishing the race, Karnazes was not finished. He kept running and ends the book expressing the frustration many runners felt in 2020: having the desire to run but having no races in which to compete. With Covid leading to his race schedule being canceled, Karnazes did the only thing that seemed natural—he ran the Miwok 100K alone.

And while most runners won’t be able to relate to the length and duration of Karnazes’s races, anyone who is a runner will understand his closing message: “For me, as for every runner, runs end, running is forever . . .” (243).

Less about training philosophies and nutritional advice than many running books, *A Runner’s High* presents not only runners but all readers the reminder that the destination itself is not the goal. The process of getting there is what matters most.