

## ***Book Review***

### ***The Running Ground: A Father, a Son, and the Simplest of Sports***

By Nicholas Thompson

Reviewed by Phil Stewart

What first struck me about *The Running Ground: A Father, a Son, and the Simplest of Sports* by Nicholas Thompson were the liner notes on the back of the book. I did not see Bill Rodgers or Joan Benoit Samuelson. In fact, there was only one name I was remotely familiar with in connection with running: Kilian Jornet, cited as an “ultramarathoner with fastest known time ascending and descending Mont Blanc and Everest.” But there was one name I knew well, but not through running: historian Ken Burns. That’s when I wondered if this book was going to be different.

I was not disappointed.

I figured the book was going to be well written. You don’t rise to being the CEO of *The Atlantic* after stops as editor in chief of *Wired* and as an editor at *The New Yorker* without being a very talented writer.

I was not disappointed.

I have to admit the title *The Running Ground* left me a bit quizzical as I opened the 248 page hard cover edition.

I was not disappointed.

This is a book about much more than running. True, running is the fabric into which Thompson explores his complicated relationship with his dad, who was a gay alcoholic, and his loving relationships with his three sons. After 100 or so pages I suddenly got it – *The Running Ground* represents what grounded the author throughout the first nearly 50 years of his life. Through thick and thin, running was always there.

I have read more than my share of running books over the years but Thompson captured exactly many moments that I have experienced in my running career. Early in the book he brilliantly captures the euphoria of a young boy running a time faster than he ever imagined.

Thompson also eloquently explores individuals who had different takes on the sport during their careers with chapters about Boston Marathon pioneer Bobbi Gibb; New York City coach Tony Ruiz; Julia Lucas, who missed out on making the U.S. Olympic Team by hundredths of a second; and Michael Westphal, a 2:29 marathoner in his prime facing Parkinson’s disease in his 60s and still showing up to run. Each vignette shows *The Running Ground* from a different perspective.

Thompson explores his own evolution as a runner. After feeling stuck running numerous marathons in the low 2:40s, he decided he wanted more and hired a coach who taught

him how to view himself differently. With his new mindset (and a steady dose of fast intervals) he reduced his PR to 2:29. Then as he advanced through his 40s came the ultras, which included an American age 45-49 group record at 50K and a few months later the fastest 50 mile time in his age group in the world.

When I finished the book I truly felt as if I had explored the sport – both my own experiences and those of the author – from every angle.

*Phil Stewart is President, Road Race Management, Inc., and Event Director, Credit Union Cherry Blossom 10 Mile*