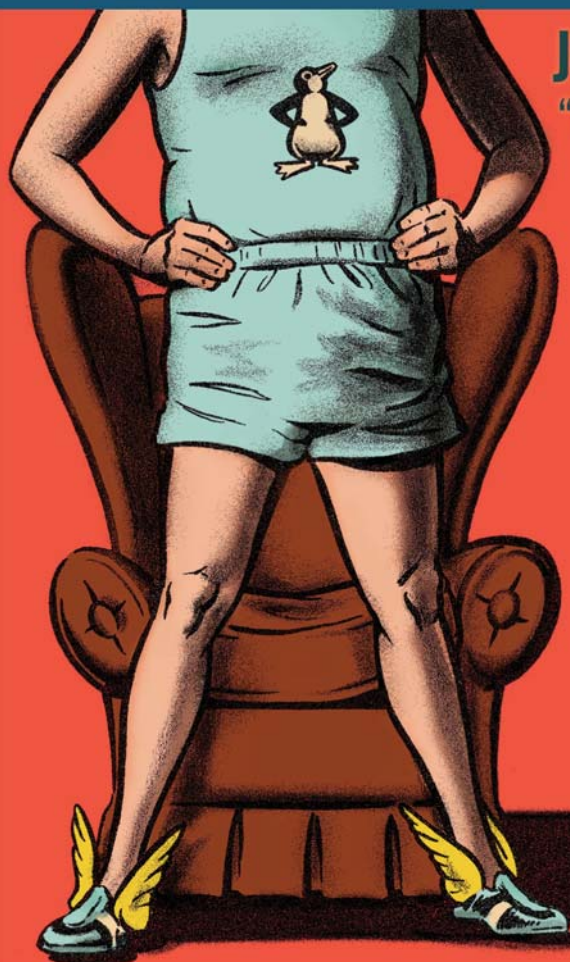


An
**ACCIDENTAL
ATHLETE**

**John
"The Penguin"
Bingham**



A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Middle Age

PRAISE FOR JOHN “THE PENGUIN” BINGHAM AND AN ACCIDENTAL ATHLETE

“John ‘The Penguin’ Bingham has touched a nerve with runners worldwide like no one in the last decade. He’s funny but serious, informal but inspirational, and his spoken and written words have become the rallying cry for tens of thousands of runners who have found a patron saint where they least expected one—in the back of the pack. With The Penguin as their leader, they have found not just the courage to start, but also the determination to finish.”

—*Amy Burfoot, Runner’s World magazine*

“John ‘The Penguin’ Bingham does it again! *An Accidental Athlete* is a charming, witty, and relatable tale of John finding himself through running. In this great book he shares his journey with us one stride and two laughs at a time.”

—*Deena Kastor, American marathon record holder,
Olympic medalist, and 12-time national champion*

“Most of us can truly identify with John Bingham’s story: There are no gold medals, no laurel wreaths, no world records. But John shows us that we have something more important: a chance, if we have the will and believe in ourselves. Because of runners like John, the wall of intimidation has crumbled, and tens of thousands of Americans are now believing in themselves. John has helped raise self-esteem and self-confidence in people all over the world. Nothing is more important to a person’s well-being.”

—*Dave McGillivray, Boston Marathon race director*

“John Bingham is Edward Abbey, Frank Shorter, Brad Pitt and George Carlin all wrapped in one. John as writer has a lesson or tale in all his adventures. I learn so much about myself

reading *The Penguin Chronicles*. As a speaker he is funny, sincere and lovable.” —Bart Yasso, *Runner's World* magazine

“*An Accidental Athlete* is a great read and an affirmation of why we run. The next time you find yourself in doubt, bring *The Penguin* with you and you'll be glad you did.”

—Kathrine Switzer, first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon, New York City Marathon winner, and author of *Marathon Woman*

“*An Accidental Athlete* is a book for everyone. Current exercisers will smile, as the mistakes John made are ones we have all made. Nonexercisers will see that—like Oprah—anyone can become an ‘adult-onset athlete.’ Get on the Penguin bus because it is leaving the station!”

—*Running Doc*™, Lewis G. Maharam, MD, author of *Running Doc's Guide to Healthy Running*

“When John steps in front of an audience, the quiet-spoken college prof disappears, and he becomes *The Penguin*. Behind his humor lies an invitation to everyone, of any size and speed, to fit as comfortably into this sport as he did at his start.” —Joe Henderson, former editor of *Runner's World* magazine

“John Bingham is the voice of the millions of those who are beginning to exercise each year. John feels their concerns and, with humor, provides the motivation to keep going.”

—Jeff Galloway, running coach and author of *Marathon: You Can Do It!*

“John Bingham brings a bit of irreverence and a big dose of humor to his talks about running and races. He gets you to laugh, and we need that before races!”

—Bill Rodgers, 4-time winner of the Boston Marathon and New York City Marathon

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INTRODUCTION

I can't remember when I stopped wanting to play. As a young child all I thought about was playing. I played with toy trucks. I played baseball with my friends; I played basketball with my neighbors. I never worried about what I was playing, or even with whom I was playing. I especially didn't worry about how well I was playing.

At some point, though, I discovered that I wasn't very good at the very activities that brought me the most joy. This was a heartbreaking moment, and the discovery sentenced me to a long period of sedentary confinement.

What characterizes the act of play, it seems to me, is that it isn't defined by arbitrary performance standards. When I watch children play, when I remember what it was like for me to play as a child, I see only the joy in the activity itself, not the awful prospect of failure or even the promise of success. It's just play.

It's difficult for us as adults to give ourselves permission to enjoy something that we don't think we're very good at. We tell ourselves that once we've reached some level of proficiency, once we've acquired some minimum set of skills, then—and only then—will the activity begin to be fun.

At least that's the way it was for me.

I wanted to play tennis, but when after a few weeks I noticed that I wasn't getting much better at it, I quit. Even though I was having fun chasing balls around the court, I quit because I didn't think I was good enough to have fun.

For me, this dreadful thought that I had to be knowledgeable or skillful about something before I could enjoy it didn't stop with athletics. I used to enjoy drinking a glass of wine from time to time until I was told how much there is to know about wine before you can decide whether you like it or not.

I had tried to become a runner at a couple of earlier points in my life, and each time I failed because I ignored the most important aspect of my running experience: the pure fun of it.

I had the idea in my head that running needed to be, if not torturous, at least physically exhausting. For it to be good for me, for running to do me any good, for me to truly experience life as a runner, I had to be at the edge of fatigue and pain at all times.

INTRODUCTION

This approach didn't work well for me.

No sane person is going to do something that repeatedly hurts him or her. People are not going to continue to hit themselves on the head with a hammer once it occurs to them that it hurts and that if they stop hitting themselves, the pain will go away.

Too often new runners—and walkers—take the attitude that they must continue to hit themselves in the head, that they must continue to accept that the activity they've taken up to make themselves feel better must first make them feel worse.

At least that's what I thought.

I thought that, as I've seen on a t-shirt, pain was weakness leaving the body. It turns out that the shirt is not correct. Pain is your body telling you that something's wrong and you should stop doing it. Pain is not your friend. Pain is not weakness. Pain is a symptom.

When I tried running in middle age, 100 pounds overweight, a 25-year pack-and-a-half-a-day smoker, drinker, and overeater, I had to take a different approach. I *knew* I wasn't going to be any good. So I just tried to enjoy myself.

And so it is that a funny thing happened on my way to middle age. I became an athlete. And not just any athlete but a runner—5K to marathon—a cyclist, a duathlete, a triathlete, and an adventure racer. All without taking a running step until I was 43 years old.

I forgot to mention that I am not just a merely mediocre athlete. I am awful. I am slow. Glacier slow. A slow runner, a slow cyclist, and a ridiculously slow swimmer. But I am having more fun than I have ever had.

***A funny thing happened on my way to middle age.
I became an athlete.***

For most of my life I was a musician. By the end of my career I was a pretty good musician. Not only was I a musician but all of my friends were musicians. I hardly knew anyone who wasn't a musician.

When I'd gather with friends, we'd do what musicians tend to do: eat, drink, and listen to music. We encountered the world as musicians. We didn't "hear" the world by choice; it was just the way we perceived our environment.

Later I was an academic: My friends were academics, and I lived in a world of academics. When I'd gather with those friends we'd do what academics tend to do: eat, drink, and complain about the students and the administrators.

We encountered the world with our minds. We thought about things a lot. We wondered about things but didn't do much else.

INTRODUCTION

And so when I became an athlete—even an embarrassingly awful athlete—I suddenly found myself encountering the world as an athlete. I started to look forward to exerting myself. I started to like the feeling I got from the honest effort of trying to do just a little more than I thought I was capable of doing.

As the years passed I discovered that even if, despite my best efforts and intentions, I had almost no athletic gifts, I still enjoyed being an athlete. My enthusiasm and joy were a mystery to everyone around me. Surely I couldn't be satisfied. Surely I would become discouraged by my abject lack of talent. Surely I would quit.

Nope, I wouldn't. And nope, I didn't. What I know for a fact is that being an athlete, any kind of athlete, is a way of life that gives more back to you than you invest. When I run or walk or cycle, or do any of the hundreds of other activities I've tried, I get the gift of knowing myself. I get the gift of discovering the courage and tenacity and relentless inner strength that I possess.

As an athlete I've come to grasp the need to move my body. I understand that sitting behind a desk all day is not what my body is designed to do. I've learned to enjoy the simple movement of my body. I smile when I run or cycle or swim. I can skip again and jump again and walk as far as I want to without getting tired.

I have been released from a life of sedentary confinement.

See, it isn't what you do that makes you an athlete. It isn't how fast or how far you go. It's waking up every day knowing that you will take on whatever the world holds for you that day as an athlete. You will embrace the challenges—physical, emotional, and spiritual—because you know that as an athlete it's the challenges that make you stronger.

***This book is an invitation for you to discover
the accidental athlete in yourself.***

This book is an invitation for you to discover the accidental athlete in yourself. This is a description of one such journey of self-discovery, and in some ways it is a guidebook to use for your own journey.

There are no rights and wrongs in this book. There are no prescriptions, no rigid programs to follow, and no easy answers. This is a self-guided tour through one life, my life, and I hope that you will see yourself somewhere in my struggle to become an athlete.

My story is funny at times, sad at times, poignant at times, and just plain silly at times. I made some mistakes only once and others over and over again. You may have too.

INTRODUCTION

In the end, though, I discovered that I didn't really make 100 mistakes, I made the same mistake 100 times. That mistake was believing that there was anyone else who could possibly know me better than I could know myself.

You are your best training partner, your best coach, your harshest critic, and your biggest fan. You are both the player and the cheerleader in your life. It shouldn't be any other way.

Join me as together we uncover the mysteries of the life of an accidental athlete.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

He's been called the Pied Piper of the second running boom. Since his column, "The Penguin Chronicles," started in *Runner's World* magazine in 1996, John "The Penguin" Bingham has become one of the running community's most popular and recognized personalities. Now that he is a feature columnist for *Competitor* magazine and a weekly blogger on Competitor.com, his popularity continues to grow.

Bingham is a national spokesperson for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training and principal announcer at the Competitor Group's Rock 'n' Roll Marathon series. He is in constant demand as a clinician and has been a featured speaker at the Boston, Chicago, New York City, London, Nike Women's, Marine Corps, Honolulu, and Portland marathons and at the Rock 'n' Roll series events in Phoenix, Dallas, New Orleans, Nashville, San Diego, Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Las Vegas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

His first book, *The Courage to Start: A Guide to Running for Your Life*, has been among the top 10 running books since its publication. His second book, *No Need for Speed: A Beginner's Guide to the Joy of Running*, became the manifesto for the second running boom. His best-selling training books, *Marathoning for Mortals: A Regular Person's Guide to the Joy of Running or Walking a Full or Half Marathon* and *Running for Mortals: A Commonsense Plan for Changing Your Life with Running*, were coauthored with his wife, Coach Jenny Hadfield.

The *New York Times* recently identified Bingham as the father of the slow running movement that has brought the joy of activity to an entire new generation of runners and walkers.

For more information on John "The Penguin" Bingham, go to <http://accidentalathlete.com>.

A funny thing happened on my way to middle age.

I became an athlete. And not just any athlete but a runner—

all without taking a running step until I was 43 years old.

Known by fans as “The Penguin” for his back-of-the-pack speed, John Bingham is the unlikely hero of the modern running boom. In this warm, witty memoir, the best-selling author and columnist recalls his childhood dreams of athletic glory, sedentary years of unhealthy excess, and a life-changing transformation from couch potato to “adult-onset athlete.”

Overweight, uninspired, and saddled with a pack-and-a-half-a-day smoking habit, Bingham found himself firmly wedged into a middle-aged slump. Then two scary trips to the emergency room and a conversation with a happy piano tuner led him to discover running—and changed his life forever.

In turns inspiring, poignant, hilarious, and heartbreaking, *An Accidental Athlete* is the story of the unexpected joys of running—the pride of the finisher’s medal, a bureau-busting t-shirt collection, intense back-of-the-pack strategizing. And one man’s discovery that middle age was not the finish line after all, but only the beginning.

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