



SWIFT FEET (PIES LIGEROS)



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During the 1990s, Tarahumara runners Victoriano Churo and Cirildo Chacarito received international recognition for their outstanding performance in several ultramarathon competitions. Running in long, colorful shirts, and sandals made out of old rubber tires, they impressed the world with their strength and endurance, and inspired a new style of running. Today, these two great runners continue the race without aspirations of fame, but with the hope that they will resist another day beside their families.

Where the Tarahumara Live

The Tarahumara—or the Rarámuri, as they call themselves—primarily live in the canyons of the Sierra Tarahumara. This mountain range is part of the Sierra Madre Occidental, a large mountain system in the southwestern part of the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Chihuahua is Mexico's largest state, and is located in the northwestern part of the country, sharing a border with the U.S. states of New Mexico and Texas. The canyon system where the Tarahumara live was formed by six rivers that drain the western side of the Sierra Tarahumara. One of these canyons is called Copper Canyon, or *Barrancas del Cobre*, named after the copper green color of the canyon walls. However, people often refer to the entire canyon system of the Sierra Tarahumara as Copper Canyon.



Overall, the system of canyons is larger and deeper than the Grand Canyon in the United States. Its rugged terrain includes high plateaus, deep canyons, rivers, waterfalls, and forests. This highly diverse geography means that there are two very different climactic zones. The weather at the bottom of the canyons is often warm and humid, and is considered to be subtropical. In contrast, the highlands at the top of the canyons are generally much cooler. Some Tarahumara people migrate to the bottom of the canyons in the winter, where the weather is warmer. In the summer, when temperatures in the canyons become too warm, they move up to the highlands.

Continued Attempts at Isolation

The Tarahumara are believed to be the largest indigenous population in Chihuahua, and one of the largest traditional Native American societies in all of North America. They commonly live in small, scattered communities. Homes are typically small cabins constructed of wood, stone, and adobe. The Tarahumara are farmers, growing corn—which forms the majority of their diet—beans, potatoes, and fruit. Some raise sheep, goats, or cattle.

They originally lived throughout the state of Chihuahua, however when Spanish missionaries and explorers arrived in the area in the sixteenth century, the Tarahumara retreated into the canyons. It was the Spanish who named them “Tarahumara.” The Tarahumara also created a name for the Spanish. They called them *chabochi*, a word still used to describe anyone who is not part of the Tarahumara culture.

Even after they retreated to the canyons in pursuit of isolation though, the Tarahumara ultimately had difficulty escaping the influence of the Spanish and all the other newcomers that followed them. While the canyons did deter outsiders for a while because the terrain is rugged and difficult to navigate, explorers soon discovered that the canyons held great wealth in the form of forests and large deposits of silver and valuable minerals. As soon as these resources were discovered, both the logging and the mining industries followed the Tarahumara into the canyon areas. Another attraction of the canyons in the Sierra Tarahumara is their scenic beauty. In recent years, tourism has also become increasingly popular in the area, and some Tarahumara communities have been displaced by the construction of hotels and other facilities designed to attract more tourists.

The Importance of Running

Translations of the name “Rarámuri,” include: “running feet,” “light feet,” and “foot-runner,” and as these translations reveal, running is an important part of the Tarahumara culture. Throughout history, it has been both a necessity and a cultural tradition. The Tarahumara people need to be good runners because they often live far away from one another, and they live in extremely rugged terrain. Quite simply, running is one of the best ways to get from one place to another. Other modes of transportation such as carts or even animals can be difficult on the steep trails that traverse the area. In the past, Tarahumara were even known to hunt by running, sometimes chasing a deer until it was tired enough to be caught.

In addition to being the most effective way to get around, running is also an important cultural tradition for the Tarahumara. Throughout their history, both men and women have competed in different versions of a game that involves running long distances. For men, the game is called *rarajipari*. In this game, a running course is set out, and the men run a certain number of laps while kicking a small ball carved from the wood of a tree root. A race can last anywhere from hours to days, and some races are up to a hundred miles long. Community members come out to watch and support the runners, cheering for them, and sometimes running some of the way with them. They also provide food and water, and even light the way at night with torches. Runners often drink *pinole*, an energy drink made out of roasted corn, milk, and sugar. Women also have a running game, called *rowena*, where they run while throwing a ring made of twigs. Tarahumara races are typically competitive events between various different communities, with bets placed on the outcome of the race.



The Tarahumara and Ultramarathons

While the Tarahumara tradition of running is hundreds of years old, it wasn't until the 1990s that they received international recognition for their running abilities. This recognition came after some Tarahumara men competed in a number of ultramarathon races in the United States. An ultramarathon is any race longer than the 26.2 miles of a regular marathon. Ultramarathon races are most commonly 50 and 100 kilometers, and 50 and 100 miles. In addition to being longer than regular marathons, ultramarathons usually take place across more rugged terrain, and in some cases there is little or no prize money.

Tarahumara participation in ultramarathons began in 1992 when writer and outdoor guide Richard Fisher took several Tarahumara men to the United States to compete in the Leadville

Trail 100, an ultramarathon of 100 miles in Colorado. Because the men did not fully understand how the race worked, and were uncomfortable running in the sneakers that Fisher supplied them with, they dropped out less than halfway through. However, the next year Fisher and the racers returned to Colorado, and Victoriano Churo won the race. Tarahumara runners also took second and fifth place that year. Rather than sneakers, the men ran in sandals made from old rubber tires, their preferred footwear at home. The runners went on to do extremely well in a number of other races including the Angeles Crest 100 Mile Endurance Run, which Cirildo Chacarito won in 1997.

In 2009, the Tarahumara runners came into the spotlight again after the publication of *Born to Run*, a best-selling book by journalist and runner Christopher McDougall. In his book McDougall describes how the example of the Tarahumara—who run without modern running shoes—helped him overcome his own running injuries. Overall though, despite brief periods of international fame, the Tarahumara and their running abilities remain largely unknown to most of the world.

A Threatened Culture

Some people worry that the tradition of running, and many other aspects of traditional Tarahumara culture, are threatened by the encroachment of modern civilization on Tarahumara society. In the past, the Tarahumara were able to evade these influences by retreating into the canyons. However, this has become increasingly difficult as modern technology makes it easier to access and develop the canyon areas. As a result, the Tarahumara are finding it more and more difficult to remain isolated from the rest of the world.

However, in spite of this historic Western incursion into Native American territory, and the gradual transculturation of Tarahumara traditions, such as in the game of *rarajipari*, the Tarahumara have shown incredible resilience and stamina, in most cases, outpacing western culture and setting an example for all future generations of runners to follow.



Glossary

- **Angeles Crest 100 Mile Endurance Run:** A 100-mile ultramarathon that takes place in California. Cirildo Chacarito won this race in 1997.
- **baptize:** To baptize a person is to perform a ceremony through which that person becomes an official member of a church.
- **chabochi:** The Tarahumara used the word *chabochi* to describe the Spanish who arrived in Mexico in the sixteenth century. Today they use it to refer to anyone who is not a Tarahumara.
- **Chihuahua:** Mexico's largest state, located in the northern part of the country. The Tarahumara live in the southwestern part of Chihuahua.
- **Converse:** A brand of shoes produced by Converse, which is a subsidiary of Nike. When Richard Fisher brought Tarahumara runners to the United States to run in the Leadville ultramarathon, he gave them Converse shoes to run in.
- **Copper Canyon:** Copper Canyon is one of a number of canyons in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, where the Tarahumara people live. Its name comes from the copper green color of the canyon wall. However, the name Copper Canyon is often used to refer to the entire canyon system in that area.
- **Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon (*Ultramaraton Caballo Blanco*):** An ultramarathon that takes place near the Copper Canyon area of Mexico.
- **Richard Fisher:** An American writer and tour guide who helped a number of Tarahumara men travel to the United States in order to compete in ultramarathons.
- **Cirildo Chacarito González:** A Tarahumara tribesman and 1997 winner of the Angeles Crest 100 Mile Endurance Run in California.
- **gringo:** A term used by Spanish-speakers to refer to a person who is a foreigner.
- **Leadville:** A city located in the U.S. state of Colorado. The Leadville Trail Run 100 ultramarathon is held near the city of Leadville.
- **Leadville Trail 100 Run:** The Leadville Trail 100 Run is an ultramarathon held every year on trails and dirt roads near Leadville, Colorado. Victoriano Churo won the 1993 Leadville Trail 100 Run.
- **onoruame:** *Onoruame* also means "great father," and is a Tarahumara god.
- **rarajipari:** A game played by Tarahumara men, often in competition with other communities. In this game, runners compete in long running races while kicking a small wooden ball.
- **Rarámuri:** The Rarámuri are largest indigenous population in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. They are more commonly called the Tarahumara, a name they were originally given by the Spanish.
- **Victoriano Churo Sierra:** A Tarahumara tribesman, and 1993 winner of the Leadville Trail 100 Run in Colorado.
- **Sierra Tarahumara:** Part of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range. Home to the Tarahumara people.
- **Swissalpine Marathon:** A race that takes place near Davos, Switzerland.

- **transculturation:** The process where an existing culture changes as it merges with new cultural influences.
- **ultramarathon:** A long-distance running race that is longer than 26.2 miles (the length of a marathon). Ultramarathon races are most commonly 50 and 100 kilometers, and 50 and 100 miles.

Additional Resources:

Books:

- Jeff Biggers (2006). *In the Sierra Madre*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- John G. Kennedy (1996). *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre: Survivors on the Canyon's Edge*. Pacific Grove, CA: Asilomar Press.
- Christopher McDougall. (2009). *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.



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http://www.questconnect.org/tara_cc_ethnic.htm
- Cynthia Gorney (2008). “Tarahumara,” National Geographic.
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/11/tarahumara-people/gorney-text>
- Milwaukee Public Museum, “The Tarahumara: Culture and History.”
<https://www.mpm.edu/research-collections/anthropology/online-collections-research/tarahumara/culture-and-history>
- Erika Montoya (July 25, 2013). “Raramuri Indigenous Runners Race in Mexico’s ‘Ultramaratón De Los Cañones’ For Their Livelihood,” Huffington Post.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/25/raramuri-ultramaraton-de-los-cañones_n_3653666.html
- Newsweek (August 4, 2002). “Running on Empty.”
<http://www.newsweek.com/running-empty-144023>



Cirildo Chacarito



Victoriano Churo

Discussion Questions

1. How is running significant to Tarahumara culture?
2. What object do they scoop with their feet as they compete in their cultural race of rarajipari? How do they make this object according to the film *Pies Ligeros (Swift Feet)*?
3. What are some of the current struggles that Tarahumara runners face today according to the film?
4. How did Victoriano and Cirildo perform in ultramarathons in the United States during the 1990's?
5. Give some hypothesis as to why the Tarahumara are such great runners.
6. In addition to being great endurance runners, why do you think the Tarahumara captivated the attention of people around the world when they competed in the ultramarathons?
7. In the early part of the 20th century, the Mexican government petitioned the Olympics committee to consider an ultramarathon as part of its Olympic events. Mexico's request never materialized. Why do you think there is no interest in bringing this event to the Olympics?
8. Victoriano states that most people run as if the finish line is proximate. How do you think that Victoriano's observation of people at races translates into a cultural criticism of modern society?

Contact

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