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Running with Wings

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Running with Wings

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photos by **JOY GODFREY**



Dustin Martin

Runners from the 2019 Wings National Team
in prayer before their race

I think the euphoria of running stems from the fact that it helps us leave Earth — repeatedly, rhythmically, rapidly. ‘Up there,’ we leave our Earthly personas and work up the courage to do things our ‘grounded’ minds can’t imagine.”

Ever since we could walk, we ran. We ran to deliver messages, to chase sustenance, to escape death. In fact, running—and generally, running very fast—is integral to our evolution as Homo sapiens. Consider your springy tendons and ligaments, your gluteus maximus, your relatively short, straight toes, your sweat glands, scant body hair, your balance and your ability to store glycogen for long periods. You could say we are all born to run. We’d be dead as a species without it.

But some of us have been running for longer than others. “Running is part of our tradition as Native people, in part because we did not have access to other forms of locomotion for longer than anyone else,” says Dustin Martin (Navajo), executive director for Wings of America, a Santa Fe-based organization designed to build healthy Native communities through youth running initiatives. “It’s more recently in our blood and in our cellular memory to have to walk or run to get to water or the fields. This doesn’t make running inaccessible to anyone else. As human beings, we’re all uniquely designed for bipedal locomotion.”

But in the Native American tradition, the connection to running just may go deeper, with an abiding cultural, spiritual and competitive legacy—and future. From ceremonial running to bring the rain or to mark the onset of puberty, to physical feats among tribal members through games and contests, to the practice of rising with the sun to move through a familiar landscape, to the collective act of plodding the Earth in prayer for a common hope, to the storied triumphs of fast Native individuals like Hopi runner Louis Tewanima, who represented the United States in the 1908



and 1912 Olympics, winning a silver medal and setting an American record for the 10,000-meter race in the latter (which remained unbroken until Billy Mills (Oglala Sioux) came along in 1964). In those same 1912 games, fellow Carlisle Indian Industrial School runner Jim Thorpe (Sac and Fox Nation) took the gold in the decathlon and pentathlon. In 1927, Hopi runner Nicholas Quamawahu won the Long Beach-New York Marathon. More recently, Wings of America board member Patti Dillon (Mi'kmaq), inducted into the National Distance Running Hall of Fame in 2006, has held records in multiple categories, including first American woman to break 2:30 in a marathon—New York City's in 1980.

These are just a few of the individuals that Wings coaches and facilitators reference in the many programs they offer to give young runners a sense of the legacy of Native running culture, including extracurricular running/walking clubs for elementary and middle school students, summer youth running and fitness camps, sponsorship/direction of national teams of high school and college students racing at competitive levels and coach and facilitator clinics. “These are the people who defined us for the world as fast runners. This is a tradition we are building on,” Dustin says.

Recognizing running as profoundly important to the future of Native American culture is a prevailing strength of the 31-year-old Wings of America, which began as a by-product of cultural art antiquities dealer William E. Channing's desire to help Native people formally fight the impacts of environmental degradation on their land, particularly as they related to the Navajo and Hopi peoples' struggles with Peabody Coal in the 1970s and '80s. William called his nonprofit The Earth Circle Foundation.

With the support of Oren Lyons (Onondaga Nation), William learned his specific intentions were not roundly embraced by his potential partners. “They were not comfortable being labeled environmentalists and aligning with a NGO that had a liberal, progressive agenda,” Dustin says. But when they saw this person who had the inclination and the dollars to do something positive, they said, “Our youth are very talented runners and are not getting the opportunities they deserve at high levels of competitive running.”

With the help of coaches like Rick Baker (Hopi) from Hopi High School (who remains the school's cross-country coach), the first Wings National Team selection race was held in the late fall of 1988. Dustin says, “I don't know who originated the name Wings [Earth Circle Foundation's sole beneficiary]. However, the fact that when you run, you fly for a split second makes our evolving goal inherent in the name. It's important that this is our name, rather than Fast Indian Warriors, Inc.”

Though the organization has broadened its mission over the years to serve all Native American youth, its genesis is actually rooted in speed, and the individuals with the talent and drive for speed will always be vital to Wings. In February, the 2019 National Team, each year composed of qualifying high school and college students, claimed the organization's 31st national team title in 31 years. Sixteen runners (eight girls, eight boys) traveled to the USA Cross-

Country Championships in Tallahassee, Florida, hailing from New Mexico, Arizona and Washington. To qualify for the National Team, Wings runners must have a C or better GPA and run a sanctioned race at a qualifying time. “After that race, some have more opportunity to go to and run at college because they were seen,” says Dustin. “They were seen praying and running as a team in uniform.” History shows that after earning their degrees, many return home to serve as coaches, teachers and health professionals with a lifelong passion for running, some fostering a second generation of Wings runners.

An alumnus of Wings, racing on its 2006 and 2007 national teams, Dustin can attest to the importance of the organization's



Dustin Martin, executive director for Wings of America



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support. Dustin, who grew up in Gallup, says, "Once I was fast, I wanted to stay fast. There is no way I would have been recruited as enthusiastically by Columbia University without the opportunity to run the race I ran with Wings as a high school senior."

And now of his eight years working with Wings, Dustin says, "The biggest gift I've been given is to have running as a primary identity, allowing me to connect with Native people in so many different ways. To serve Native youth is an incredible honor."

As was clear in Dustin's case, running is the pulsing vein in many youths' lives. Santa Fe-based artist, and long-time Wings board member Cathy Short (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) says, "Something as simple as running becomes an anchor for all other things—health, higher education, tribal connections and pride. It is often a struggle to help Native youth feel proud of their heritage." She has seen children's self-confidence blossom when they set and complete running goals with Wings' support. "If we can reach younger children, and reach them year-round, they're going to always want to run."

Dustin says, "Initially, we relied on the perception of us as winners. We're super fast, and we're the best. People love an underdog story. To see these youths come out of nowhere from nowhere and show up runners who have every advantage to their name is something we've capitalized on. Only in the last five years have we looked inside. We're not making enough opportunities for kids who do not see themselves as runners, who do not see themselves as Wings National Team members."

In 2015, with a grant from Nike's N7 fund, Wings launched Flight Club, an extracurricular program now in more than eight locations across Indian Country, designed to welcome Native youth to move and explore their immediate surroundings—at any speed. Through running games, health guidance and historical and cultural Native American education, more Indigenous youth are getting the opportunity to be a part of the Wings family.

"I do not want kids to feel you should only be out there running hard and fast if you've got your Wings shirt on. Come as you are. The group is going to wait for you. We are here to empower each other through movement today. Being part of Wings, you can run and feel you are part of a community even if you are running by yourself, you are running with the prayers of people who are running for the same reasons."

Since 1988, Wings programs have served no fewer than 50,000 Native youth, including the 15,000 involved with two-day Running & Fitness Camps held the last 10 years in the summer on Tribal lands coast to coast. "Native kids are endowed with a greater sense of what running means in ways that I have a hard time putting into words. When they express that or they outwardly act that out, it's sometimes through a ritual or language that I do not understand. So we communicate our appreciation for the activity and let our participants embody that in whatever way their family has taught them to. What's important is that at the end of the day, there is camaraderie around the fact that we are Native runners."



Dustin Martin

The 2019 Wings National Team at the 2019 USATF Cross Country Championships' Junior race



Students from Native American Community Academy train and play through the Flight Club program



Ever evolving and as if by gravitational pull, Wings has been aligning in vision near the environmental advocacy thrust that birthed it. “We have stumbled upon a task or message that is more important than it ever was. As runners, we are stewards of the earth in ways that other people who don’t run or who do not explore the land on their feet can’t know. This speaks more to the virtues of how rooted [environmental] lessons and ethics are in the need to move through your landscape.”

Dustin refers most specifically to four different prayer runs that Wings has been associated with in the past two years. In March of 2018, the Bears Ears Prayer Running Alliance organized Sacred Strides for Healing, which states, “Through the sacred act of running, we intend to promote healing and prayer for the sacred sites in and around The Bears Ears.” The multi-day, 800-mile prayer run was formed in response to the current administration’s reduction of the Bear Ears National Monument boundaries by 85 percent. Representatives from tribes in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah gathered, ran four different routes, and converged at White Rock, Utah, to move in solidarity to Bears Ears. “My tool is running,” Dustin says in Outside Magazine’s film about the movement, referring to his tool for protest. Dustin was named one of the magazine’s boldest activists in 2018.

“When people still had to move on their feet to know one another is a pretty good metric for when we were still really ourselves as Native societies,” Dustin says. “For Indigenous people, running means connection to your landscape. That connection to your landscape is going to instill you with an awareness and an attitude that is necessary to take care of the next generation. With maturity and introspection—with running, Wings has come to understand that this is for everybody. Running is for everybody but only if the landscape is for everybody.”

To learn more about the work of the organization go to wingsofamerica.org.

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