

## **Episode 5: Running in the Dark with Michael Crawley**

Interviewer – Lucie McNeil

Interviewer:

We all love stories, stories about ourselves, about how we live and what the future might hold. We know that's why lots of people, myself included, just love being part of book festivals, to explore the story behind that individual's unbelievable way of thinking up a book right there up close to try to understand a different way of looking, of being, from a different seat. This is what anthropologists do too. Listening, learning, and holding a multiverse of other people's stories so that we can question often entrenched perspectives and think again because we're still very new here on the planet. Anthropologists help us understand where our present day conditioning comes from to loosen its grip a little bit.

Interviewer:

So we took a tea break or two over summer in Durham University, one of the largest anthropology departments in the UK with six of their researchers. Researchers who are on vastly different journeys to understand many different groups and individuals' ways of being. Their stories can help us think about how we live now and next.

Michael Crawley:

They wanted to be dangerous and that was the reason for going running in the middle of the night. I think that's a good defense of the anthropological method in the sense that I was there for six months sleeping in a compound with people who were doing that. And I didn't even know it was happening for the first six months until it was like I was part of the group and then I was invited out to do that. So that's the kind of insight that you wouldn't get from approaching that research in any other way. It was exciting as an anthropologist, I guess. It was like, yeah, a moment of acceptance I suppose.

Interviewer:

Michael Crawley spent 15 months in Ethiopia training with runners at all levels of the sport from night watchmen hoping to change their lives to world-class marathon runners. He chatted to us about why it makes sense to Ethiopian runners to get up at 3:00 AM to run up and down a hill in hyena territory and how the so-called cyberfication of running apps changes traditional running communities.

Michael Crawley:

My name is Michael Crawley. I'm an assistant professor in social anthropology. When I was a kid, I think I mainly wanted to be a footballer, at least to begin with.

Interviewer:

And which part of the country could that have been in?

Michael Crawley:

I would've wanted to play for Newcastle, ideally.

Interviewer:

Good answer. So how did you get into anthropology?

Michael Crawley:

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I got into anthropology sort of sideways from English literature. So my first degree was English and then I studied international development and I was writing essays about development studies, but also doing a lot of running in my spare time and writing a blog about running for the Guardian. And one of my advisors, who ended up being my PhD supervisor, suggested me bringing these two things together basically and doing something that combined my interest in development with interest in running by going to Ethiopia and doing something on how people try to change their lives through running economically, and more broadly. So I ended up doing a PhD in anthropology that way. But even before I started the PhD, I knew that I wanted to write something that wasn't just an academic book, that was for a broader audience. I wanted to be able to try to communicate those ideas a little bit more broadly. So the writing side of it's always been really important to me.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Okay. And so before we circle back to your time in Ethiopia, talk to us about what you're studying now, please, Michael.

Michael Crawley:

The new project is basically about endurance generally, so what people think about endurance in different parts of the world. We have fairly stereotypical ideas sometimes about what endurance might mean to people like climbing Sherpas in the Himalayas and then I think in the West we've come to think of endurance in terms of data and performance analysis that is quite science driven. So I wanted to do a broad comparative study on what people think about endurance in different parts of the world.

Michael Crawley:

So I was in Nepal doing stuff with trail runners, but also with Sherpas who were working on Everest. And then I went to Mexico to work with some runners there, and then I've done various other bits of field work in the Lake District and other places basically as well. So the idea is to have a holistic look at how people make endurance practices meaningful in their lives. So what I wanted to talk about today was one particular chapter of the book, which is about self-tracking practices and the way that people end up thinking about themselves and the way that they endure in terms of data primarily.

Michael Crawley:

The entrepreneur Aaron deSousa recently announced his intention to host an enhanced games in 2024, a version of the Olympics where the use of performance enhancing drugs will be not only permitted, but actively encouraged. The response has been largely one of incredulity coupled with anxieties about the welfare of those participating. This has led to renewed interest in the concept of the cyborg, which raises the question of where the human ends and where technology begins.

Michael Crawley:

When we imagine a cyborg, we are far more likely to conjure up an image of Robocop than someone running with a watch or their phone and headphones. But it's important to think about how even these seemingly mundane technologies change our relationship with endurance sport. Whilst the enhanced games and the use of performance enhancing drugs has become extremely controversial, there's recently been a proliferation of wearable technology and other self-tracking devices that are marketed to amateur endurance athletes as explicitly performance enhancing. Amongst the devices I've used in the process of researching my new book is the Whoop band, which measures heart rate variability or HRV.

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Michael Crawley:

This attempts to monitor the autonomic nervous system to calculate the level of stress the body's under giving a daily strain score and measuring how well you've slept as a percentage. Another device I've used is from a brand called Super Sapiens and uses technology initially developed for people with diabetes. It uses a filament that remains in the arm for two weeks and which sends a live glucose reading to a smartphone app using Bluetooth. Like many other tracking devices, Super Sapiens promised to help people to become the best version of yourself through harnessing a new level of insight into your body.

Michael Crawley:

This is the claim made by almost all of the companies involved in self-tracking that the data they generate will allow you to understand yourself better, and therefore to make better decisions about how to move and rest and eat. What does seem to be new with devices like Whoop, however, is the attempt to make this kind of analysis a holistic one that encompasses all that we do, rather than just tracking and analyzing particular activities as we would with a device like a GPS watch.

Michael Crawley:

The main way in which Whoop aims to help people understand themselves better is through a strain score that takes into account not only exercise, but also the effects of a stressful meeting or the two hours you spent chasing your children around a park. Whilst all of these things do clearly influence our ability to perform, it seems important to me to take a step back and to consider whether quantifying all of these things according to the same metric and constantly seeking optimization in everything that we do is actually a good way to live.

Michael Crawley:

One other thing that interests me most about these kinds of devices is that they're always marketed as giving us privileged insights into how we feel. A recent Whoop advert, for example, included the line, "You know the inside of everything except you." The idea is that these technologies would know more about how we're feeling than we do ourselves. I wonder though, having worn a variety of them for the last year, whether all of this data may in fact do precisely the opposite instead making it more difficult for us to make intuitive decisions. If I wake up feeling good, but an app on my phone says that my sleep score was only 20%, I begin to question how I feel, for example.

Michael Crawley:

What might the future hold if this trend towards datafication continues? We might imagine AI running coaches that are fed various forms of data from GPS tracking or to glucose levels and the amount of lactic acid in the blood. They might tell you the optimum time to go to bed, exactly how long to sleep for and tailor an individualized training program to your precise needs. Perhaps they will tell us which heart rate zone we should be in for each training run we do, and administer a brief electric shock whenever we err from it.

Michael Crawley:

All of this might, in one sense, optimize performance, but such highly individualized solutions would have consequences for our social lives and relationships. If all of our runs are dictated by specific heart rate zones, then we cannot really run with other people, for example. As with a debate on performance enhancing drugs, we have to ask what this does to human agency? What happens if we stop making any

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decisions for ourselves? The normalization of self-tracking and optimization devices in the world of sport and the normalization of performance enhancing drug use through events like the enhanced games may also have an effect on how we work.

Michael Crawley:

If it becomes acceptable to take drugs to increase performance at work, for instance, the effect of this is higher productivity expectations for everybody. What might be the long-term consequences of the pushing back of human limits and what effects will the distribution of these kinds of technologies have on equality? 50 years ago, Margaret Mead wrote, "It's very important that we start asking ourselves seriously just how much of this technology we want, how much of it we need, and why do we intuitively fear it?" I think these questions are as relevant now as ever.

Interviewer:

So much there. I mean, I love this new area that you're moving into and I think it's even more powerful if people understand what your last project was. So could you talk to us about what you did in Ethiopia and the people that you lived and worked with and trained with, because that just gives us a lovely bookend for what you're looking at now.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, sure. So I spent 15 months in Ethiopia living and training alongside a group of mainly professional athletes, although I did try to spend time with people from various different levels of the sport. And my idea was to basically trace what it's like to try to change your life, as most of the Ethiopian runners put it, through running. So most people wanted to be able to support their families, to be able to support themselves financially, and that was the main motivation for running.

Michael Crawley:

And I wanted to understand what it was like to live a life that is dedicated entirely to doing that basically. So I lived in a compound with a group of athletes and tried as far as possible to follow the rhythms of training and rest. I was mainly in Addis, but I also went to training camps in Gonda, in Bekoji, Debre Behan, places like that. And then I also traveled with athletes to races in China and Istanbul and various other places to try to understand the full kinds of trajectories of their athletic lives.

Interviewer:

So day-to-day what was it like being in a compound and what did you learn just from the day-to-day before you even got out running?

Michael Crawley:

Day-to-day life, I suppose for a runner is quite different from everybody else. So we were up three mornings a week at 4:30, 4:45 in the morning to get a bus out to various different parts of the city that were valued for particular kind of environmental conditions. Then we would train. We would then usually get stuck in traffic on the way back into the city so we'd be away for a training run sometimes for eight or nine hours. And then people would sleep, basically eating and sleeping for large portions of the day, and then running again and then sleeping again, basically. So quite a restricted life in some ways as an athlete in Ethiopia, it was understood as a sacrifice by the people that I lived with, but one that potentially had this huge payoff at the end of it.

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Interviewer – Lucie McNeil

Interviewer:

And isn't it all about being in the collective and each person is helping other people in the group to be at their best? Can you talk about how that works? Because obviously that tracks back to what these apps now are trying to do in a completely different format.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, absolutely. So basically one of the main things that I wrote about in my PhD thesis was the fact that Ethiopian runners tended to see energy as something that was shared between people, so not as something that was just contained or possessed by an individual body. So that meant that it was very important to them that people were training in the same way and that they were training in a group, and that training was visible to other people. You weren't really supposed to run on your own, that was seen as really quite antisocial behavior. So the idea was that you were supposed to share your energy with other people by being in this group environment, and that the only way to really transform yourself as an athlete was to be embedded in that group and sharing energy basically equitably with people.

Michael Crawley:

We'd do these very elaborate warmup routines that I found quite difficult to follow at first, where we would do these rhythmic exercises that were basically designed to attune ourselves to each other to actually be able to run in step with each other in speed sessions, which I suppose is a bit more similar to competitive cyclists who ride in each other's slip streams. Their understanding of energy is more similar to that, but it was all about learning to be with each other and trust each other and share energy equitably between the group.

Interviewer:

So you must have had to learn to speak the language a little bit, right?

Michael Crawley:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Probably very running related, I'm guessing.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, very running related in Amharic.

Interviewer:

Amharic, yeah. Not so good at talking about politics or anything like that, but good at talking about training regimes and stuff. But yeah, this idea of collective energy, I suppose, is very different from the way that self-tracking devices or that sports scientists would think about energy as something that is basically a system of inputs and outputs of an individual body that could be measured in a lab. That would be quite different to the way that an Ethiopian athlete would conceive of energy.

Interviewer:

Have you put this new information back to the communities that you lived amongst?

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Interviewer – Lucie McNeil

Michael Crawley:

Well, not so much that, but the GPS watches that most runners wear, I suppose here, did start to get introduced into Ethiopia while I was there in 2015, 2016.

Interviewer:

How did that change things?

Michael Crawley:

Well, what was interesting about that was that usually there would be one or two watches in a group of people, so it wasn't that everybody had a watch. And normally the coach would control who wore it on a specific run, and it was used for particular reasons. What happened was that the athletes would only really agree to wear it on particular kinds of run where they really wanted to run fast and know exactly what was happening, and then they would refuse to wear it on easy runs in the forest and things like that because they actually didn't want to know. Or if they did wear it, they would wear it and see how slow they could go rather than how fast they could go.

Michael Crawley:

So they would play a game to see how slow they could run a kilometer in the forest, which given the narratives of acceleration and always getting better and being faster every day that the marketing of these devices relies on was very different than the kind of approach that they had. I thought it was interesting because their approach was very selective. So what they were basically saying is, "These devices can be useful in particular moments, but we wouldn't want to use them all the time and become dependent on them or that they're appropriate in some situations but not others."

Interviewer:

So they kept the device very much othered.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, and they would share them as well between each other. So they would, if people were doing particular kinds of runs when they wouldn't need it, they would lend it to them and it would be used far more collectively than the way that we would tend to use them.

Michael Crawley:

But it was funny, the big project to break the two-hour marathon, they gave watches to the athletes who were involved in that in Ethiopia and Kenya, and they were kind of astounded by the number of kilometers that Lelisa Desisa, the Ethiopian athlete, was running. But it was because it wasn't only him who was wearing the watch. So it was one of these examples where it's assumed that they'll be used in one particular way-

Interviewer:

But it wasn't.

Michael Crawley:

... but it's not. Yeah.

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Interviewer – Lucie McNeil

Interviewer:

Yeah, that's interesting. And didn't you run yourself for 2 hour 6 or 2 hour-

Michael Crawley:

I ran 2:20.

Interviewer:

2:20, okay. Yeah. And is that something that you've been able to do since you did that?

Michael Crawley:

That's the time I ran shortly after I got back from Ethiopia. I haven't been able to reproduce that since then.

Interviewer:

And are you still running now?

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, still running. Part of the new project is doing ultra-marathons and things like that in order to write about them. So yeah, still running.

Interviewer:

So you have that experience. And if you could categorize it now all these years on, what do you think about that when you've stepped away from it and now you're looking at, I suppose, cyborgification on one level?

Michael Crawley:

Well, I would really like to go back to Ethiopia and see what's happened with the GPS watches since then. I've had two plans to go back and had them interrupted by first the pandemic and then the war in Ethiopia. So I haven't been able to go back, but it would be interesting to see. I imagine that GPS watches and other things are far more widespread in Ethiopia now, so it'd be really interesting to see how they've transformed the way that people behave.

Michael Crawley:

One of the interesting things was that they were used in this very collective way to begin with. What did gradually start to happen towards the end of my field work was that people would see that they were covering kilometers more easily in particular places. So they would travel to particular parts of Addis Ababa in order to run for that reason, which was actually driving a slightly more individualistic way of thinking about training eventually.

Interviewer:

So that did creep in.

Michael Crawley:

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So the athletes who had cars would drive to places like Sendafa because they thought that that was going to allow them to do the easier runs in a way that was less taxing, and that was to do with the data from the watches. So it would be interesting to go and see how much it's driving a bit more of an individualized approach to things.

Interviewer:

Do you have personal thoughts about that and the outcomes that may lead to in terms of running as a sport? Do you have a strong personal view or professional view around that?

Michael Crawley:

I think we probably need to think a bit harder about the access to some of these testing technologies that we have. Because what was interesting, people have GPS watches in Ethiopia now, but they don't necessarily have access to some of the testing technologies that the athletes in America or Europe would have. So as an example with one of the very good athletes that I knew, recently where he ran, I think it was Chicago Marathon, and he dropped out after 35 kilometers and he had basically clinically low iron levels in his blood. So really dangerously low iron levels which would've been picked up by routine blood testing if he'd had access to that through the sports institute or something. But he was giving blood samples to the anti-doping agency because he was registered in the blood testing pool for elite athletes every two weeks. But he wasn't given the information that he had clinically low iron levels.

Interviewer:

At the same time.

Michael Crawley:

At the same time. So they're taking data or analyzing the blood of athletes in Ethiopia purely for a surveillance reason of seeing if they're doping or not. But the athletes themselves don't have access to any of that kind of information, which even amateur athletes in the UK quite often do these blood tests. There's several companies that offer these kinds of blood tests, which is specifically marketed as being performance enhancing, which if he'd had access to that, he probably would've run really well in Chicago Marathon. So I guess it's about you're thinking about these things in terms of which of them would actually be useful.

Interviewer:

For mutuality.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, how these should be distributed to make it fair basically.

Interviewer:

So where do you feel that your project may lead you to now? Where are you up to, I suppose, with it?

Michael Crawley:

I have a deadline in December to finish the book, so I'm trying to write as much of it as I can. Yeah, as I said before, it's looking at how people make meaning out of endurance. So part of that is looking at how we've tended to represent particular cultures who are associated with endurance.



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Michael Crawley:

So for that reason, I went to spend some time with the Tarahumara in Mexico who were made famous by a book called Born to Run by Chris McDougall, and I tried to tell that story a bit more from their point of view than he does in his book. I was interested in the fact that they see running as primarily a form of prayer. So the big running festivals have to do with trying to make it rain basically. And running and dancing are seen as two practices that are very similar to each other or that are interchangeable in those kinds of rituals.

Interviewer:

Because of the energy?

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, because they're both described as things that God likes to see people doing basically as a form of work and expenditure of energy, but seen in very different terms to, I guess, how we might think of energy in relation to running. And then I wanted to go and do some work with climbing Sherpas because a lot of the time I think there's this assumption that the reason that they're able to work at high altitudes is because of various genetic adaptations or there's always this idea that it's easy for them, which is another thing that is said about Ethiopian runners as well, and Kenyan runners. "Oh, they're born at altitude, so it's easy for them to run like that," which is absolutely not true at all. And it denies the kind of hard work and sacrifice that goes into making people able to do those things.

Michael Crawley:

It's definitely true that if you look at articles about Sherpa climbers on CNN and those kinds of news agencies, it's always about biological secrets or that they're supermen or something like that. And maybe it's because the people who interpret these things more in terms of culture don't get the kind of platform to write about it as well, or that we are not kind of shouting loud enough, that might also be why. But yeah, so hopefully I'll be doing a bit of that in the book.

Interviewer:

Yes. Because Out of Thin Air you talked about, which I think nobody else would really know that the runners, and you didn't know this for a while, that get up in the middle of the night sometimes at two o'clock in the morning and go on these wild runs in the forest. And you weren't invited to do that for a while until they'd accepted you as somebody who clearly was a dedicated runner and was prepared to work properly as opposed to work hard as part of the group. And that you later stood on a starting line somewhere and were like, "I bet nobody else has been running in the middle of the forest at two o'clock in the morning." And that would give you such a sense of preparedness, I suppose, or confidence in another way.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, I think that-

Interviewer:

So that's not just about genetics or anything, that's preparedness and hard work.

Michael Crawley:

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Yeah, and consciously doing things that make you feel, they would describe it as dangerous. They want it to be dangerous, and that was the reason for going running in the middle of the night. I think that's a good defense of the anthropological method in the sense that I was there for six months sleeping in a compound with people who were doing that, and I didn't even know it was happening for the first six months until it was like I was part of the group and then I was invited out to do that. So that's a kind of insight that you wouldn't get from approaching that research in any other way.

Interviewer:

Absolutely. And what was it like just to be asked six months in and suddenly to have the awareness that people have been doing this? Was it-

Michael Crawley:

It was exciting as an anthropologist, I guess, a moment of acceptance, I suppose.

Interviewer:

Was it the same running but just at night or-

Michael Crawley:

That one was hill reps mainly. There was a hill that they liked to run up that you couldn't really run up during the day because it was on the road and there was too much traffic. That was the main reason for doing it. But it was also about the way that Haile described it, was that he felt like he was going a bit soft because he now had access to a team bus that was taking him places to train, and his life was a bit more comfortable. He felt like he was losing his edge a little bit and that getting up and going running in the night was also a way of reminding himself what it used to be like when he had to do that, I suppose.

Interviewer:

Yes. So again, it's a conscious bringing yourself back to either childhood or to a memory being really in the body as opposed to just being competitive when we think about why people do things.

Michael Crawley:

Yeah, and deliberately trying to make running as interesting as possible. I think that was also something that they were really concerned with was making it adventurous, consciously trying to make it an adventurous and creative process rather than just following a training program and being quite passive. They wanted it to be this active process of making it interesting.

Interviewer:

Yeah, and the reason I'm pushing on this is, imagine if you woke up in the middle of the night to your alarm and you looked and saw that you'd only had 40 minutes sleep. You might not carry on and go off and do that if you were looking at the app on your phone. So how do you think that will affect that inspirational, getting back into nature and just doing something completely different?

Michael Crawley:

Yes, it would've been really interesting to have had things like the Whoop band with me when I was in Ethiopia, because would definitely have hated that, that sort of thing. It'd have been like, "You've had three hours sleep. You absolutely are not ready to do any training," because they're quite prescriptive of

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these things. They say your recovery is in the red zone, or whatever, so you shouldn't run. But if you did that in Ethiopia with the approach that they have to sleep in training, you wouldn't really do much running at all, I guess. Yeah, I guess it's just a different-

Interviewer:

It's a different way. So when you're thinking about conclusions around this piece of research and for the book, where do you feel like you're heading? Is it too early to say or what can you tell us?

Michael Crawley:

It's actually a bit too early to say, I think, in terms of absolute conclusions. But I guess one of the main messages I want to get across is what I've already said about this reliance on technology that we might want to not necessarily throw all these things away. I'm not going to do that really strong argument that we need to throw away all the heart rate monitors and go back to nature or anything like that. But just to think about these things a little bit more critically, to think about the way that they might be driving us into these more individualistic ways of thinking and whether it might be more sensible to focus on more sociable and more environmentally attuned ways of doing things.

Michael Crawley:

So I think the final chapter will be on the way that people connect endurance sport to climate change activism. There's quite a lot of people doing that now, are really trying to think about the kind of footprint that these kinds of events have. I'm interested in how people connect up doing things that are very difficult in places like the Lake District with thinking about effects on the environment.

Interviewer:

Can you tell us about the award that you received for the book *Out of Thin Air*?

Michael Crawley:

Margaret Mead was an American anthropologist who wrote a very famous book called *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She used to write her books almost exclusively for trade presses. So she was very much of the opinion that it was important for anthropologists to write for public audience and to actually be read outside of academia. She's been described at one point, the most famous woman in the world, which is quite an amazing claim for an anthropologist. So she was like, I don't know, Oprah Winfrey or Taylor Swift or something, 50 years ago.

Michael Crawley:

But she also wrote a lot about the future and what the future might hold 50 years ago, and that stuff's really interesting to read now. The Margaret Mead Award is an award for a work that communicates anthropological ideas to a broader audience beyond the academy. What was interesting about it was that when I went through the list of previous books that had won it, there is actually in the last 25 years, not been another book that had been published by a trade press.

Michael Crawley:

So I think that's probably mainly to do with the pressures that people are under in the academy, especially in America, that's been promoted you have to publish a book with one of the very few prestigious university presses. So people tend to do that, and those books don't tend to get read very

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widely. So it's a symptom of the way that academics aren't necessarily encouraged to do this public facing stuff, which I think is really important, especially as Margaret Mead herself was adamant about publishing her own work in trade presses.

Interviewer:

Yeah, and particularly because it is the study of how humans behave, you'd really want the research to be given to the widest number of humans-

Michael Crawley:

Absolutely.

Interviewer:

... so that we can learn better about ourselves faster as we look at the challenges that humanity's facing today. So I think that's really exciting. Thank you. And good luck with the new book.

Michael Crawley:

Thank you very much.

Interviewer:

Thank you.