

Ep #273: Running While Black with Alison Mariella Désir



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Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you've never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, your fat running coach. I help fat women over 40 to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. I have worked with thousands of women to help them achieve their running goals and now I want to help you.

Jill: Hi runners. So I am so fucking excited to introduce you this week to endurance athlete, activist and mental health advocate Alison Mariella Désir. And just a little bit of backstory before we dive in, running saved Alison's life. She was at rock bottom, searching for meaning and structure and she started marathon training and found that it vastly improved both her physical and mental health.

And so she's training for this marathon, but as she became involved in the community and learned its history, she realized that the sport of running was largely built with white people in mind. So to help make running more inclusive and welcoming to people of color, she founded Harlem Run, a New York City based running movement, and Run 4 All Women, which has raised over \$150,000 for Planned Parenthood and \$270,000 for Black Voters Matters. So this woman is getting shit done.

She's also the co-chair of the Running Industry Diversity Coalition, a Run Happy advocate for Brooks Running, you know how I love my Brook shoes, and an athlete advisor for Oiselle. She is also a graduate of Columbia University with not just one master's degree, but two master's degrees. She has been published in Outside Magazine, she contributed the foreword for *Running Is My Therapy* by Scott Douglas, and founded the Meaning Through Movement tour.

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And what we're going to be talking about today, she is the author of the recently released book, *Running While Black*. So Alison, welcome to the show.

Alison: Thank you so much. I am really excited to have this opportunity to chat.

Jill: Me too. Me too. So as I just mentioned, you're the author of the book *Running While Black*, which is such a good book. So I'm literally recommending it to everybody I know. And your story is incredible. And what you have done to educate and bring diversity to the running space is really amazing.

So I think we're, like I'm hoping to kind of start is maybe to have you share a little bit about how you came to running and what running means to you.

Alison: Yes, so actually I've always been active. From a very young age my parents put me in all kinds of activities. They were immigrants, my mom from Colombia, my father from Haiti, and they wanted to make sure that my brother and I had all kinds of experiences.

So I was in soccer, I was in music school, I was in art school, I was in track, right? I ran the 400 meter hurdles and the 400 through high school. And I wouldn't come to long distance running later in life, mostly because I always got the message that track and field was for Black folks and long distance running, cross country was for white folks.

So as I reflect on growing up, and I do in the book, I think about the ways that I definitely saw my classmates like running cross country, but it just in my mind was so clearly something that was for white, thin people that it didn't even spark my interest.

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That is until 2011. I was very depressed on my couch, unemployed. My father had Lewy Body Dementia, and so it's a degenerative condition. At that point I had to help change his diapers and, you know, feed him and was very depressed as a result of it.

So I did what most people do when they're at home on couch, scroll through social media looking at other people living their best lives. And one person's journey stuck out to me. He was a Black guy, not your typical marathon runner body. And, you know, of course, I'm using that in quotes, because he wasn't thin. He was husky, average size, but he was training for a marathon and sharing how it was changing and transforming his life.

It's like, you know, all of us when we start running, we want to go out there and evangelize everybody to get moving. It was that and I was struck by his journey because, again, he didn't have the "typical" body, he was Black, and in my mind Black people didn't run marathons.

But sure enough, he completed this marathon. And seeing his example, this is where representation is important, seeing that he could do it made me feel like well, you know what? I'm at rock bottom, why not try it? If it could change his life, maybe it could change mine.

And so I did. I remember getting off my couch, walking a mile to the George Washington Bridge, I lived in New Jersey, taking a bus over the bridge two trains to get to the team and training office where I signed up to train for the San Diego Rock'n'Roll Marathon in exchange for raising \$3,500 for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

And that is really what started my journey. It's hard to believe that this very personal moment is what led to this career, life, book, family that I have now.

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Jill: Wow. So okay, first of all, I just want to point out, you said you walked over the George Washington Bridge, did I hear that correctly?

Alison: No, no, I walked a mile to the George Washington.

Jill: Oh my gosh, okay.

Alison: That would have been a story.

Jill: Like that's so terrifying. Oh my gosh. Okay, wait, I totally misheard that.

Alison: No, that bridge scares the hell out of me.

Jill: Okay, so what was it like, I guess, training for that marathon with the team and training? Especially because, right, so you'd seen one Black person training for a marathon on social media, like not actually in person. And here you are, you show up to all these team and training workouts, was that uncomfortable? Did you feel kind of weird about it?

Alison: Yeah, yeah. I was often the only person in these trainings, right? The trainings probably had anywhere between 70 to 100 people each week. There was the long run on Saturday and then there was another run on Wednesday night. And so I was often the only person, but I was so, you know when you're really at rock bottom, when you're really desperate, it allows you to like cling to things for hope, right?

So running was this thing. I very quickly realized that the ability to move my body woke me up, right? Like think about it, I had been on the couch, I had been self-medicating, I had been doing everything not to feel. And then I started running and suddenly I was getting this powerful feedback like, oh,

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well, if I run fast, I feel this in my legs. When my breath is making that sound it's because I'm moving at this pace, right?

Suddenly, I was getting all of these embodied feelings and reconnecting with myself. And it allowed me to see like, “Whoa, I'm actually, I may not be in control of my circumstances or the world, but I can control my body and what I do with myself.” So that was just so powerful and eye opening.

So I was hooked on that and I decided even if there is a sense of discomfort in being the only Black person in this space, it's worth it because I'm coming back to life, right? So there was this juxtaposition of this powerful force in my life in a space that did not have me in mind.

Jill: Yeah, but it sounds like that force was so strong that you're like, “I'm just willing to do whatever I need to do to get it.”

Alison: Exactly, exactly.

Jill: I love that.

Alison: I was like, you know, I sort of became really evangelized, right? Like the training plan was my Bible. Like I could not be a minute late. If it said run seven miles and I ran 6.94, you better believe that I was running around the block four times to get that last bit. It was beautiful that I had finally found something that energized me.

Jill: Yeah. And I mean, a lot of people say running saved my life and I think it's true. I think there's a lot of us out there that feel that way.

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So okay, so you finished the marathon. Did you, because you started this amazing movement called Harlem Run, did you start that while you were still training for the marathon or was it afterwards?

Alison: It was after. So during my marathon training, as I started to gain more confidence and love the sport, I started a blog that only my mom was reading, honestly. But the blog was called powderedfeet.com based on the nickname my father had given me about being so active you never see me, just the footprints that I leave in powder. Like that was the nickname he gave me.

So I named the blog powderedfeet.com and I was posting about my journey and about just all these discoveries, the ways that movement can help your mental health, not just your physical health. And then after completing the marathon I decided, you know what? I want to actually create a space for Black people like me to experience this.

So I decided to start a run club that I then called Powdered Feet Run Club. And it was maybe six months of showing up every Monday by myself. I was posting on social media, social media wasn't as big 10 years ago as it is now.

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: But posting on social media, putting fliers in different stores in Harlem, attempting to connect with other groups. And nobody was showing up. But again, running was such a powerful transformational experience in my life that I knew that I needed to share it with people. And I was willing, with my mom's support I was willing to show up as long as it took for the community to show up with me.

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Jill: I mean, six months is a really long time to show up every week. And I think that just shows the commitment that you had.

Alison: I don't know if I would do it now, exactly. I think about how lonely and just how embarrassing, like we always go to that place of shame like, I must just be a bad person or I must not be worth it, that's why people aren't showing up. When really they are, I mean, endless reasons why somebody might not show up.

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: A lot of reasons rooted in their own insecurities and worries, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: Thankfully, my mom would say things like essentially, if you build it, they will come, right? Like you got to keep showing up. And that helped me through it. But I don't know, like I said, I don't know if I would do that again.

Jill: Yeah. But she was right, she was right. And I think like, when you believe in something you are willing to do whatever it takes.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: So I mean, I'm just glad that you stuck with it. Because, I mean, can you tell a little bit, I mean, I know the story from reading the book. But I think that the evolution of how it started out and there were a few people and like, what it's grown to now is kind of amazing. And so I'd love for you to maybe share some of the highlights.

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And some of the challenges because I know that you had a little bit of, you know, there was some conflict with other running groups and so forth. Which when I read it, I was like, “Yep, not surprised. Sounds about right.”

Alison: Absolutely. So yeah, it started as this very almost naive idea. I just wanted to find other people in my neighborhood who looked like me to run with me. And sticking with it for six months I got, the first person who showed up, Christa, who I call the OG. She was this white woman, which is not what I anticipated.

I was like, “Oh my gosh, I want Black people to run with me.” But her showing up showed me that this would be possible, right? That eventually people would start showing up en mass. Within the first year and a half we had over 100 people showing up, and that's due to, you know, I now call it transformational leadership, at that point I didn't know what I was doing.

But what I saw early on is that there were certain people who would show up who were deeply invested in what I was creating, right? Who shared the same values, who were making sure that nobody was left running by themselves, who were excited about sticking around and hanging out after the run.

But I noticed these people who were showing up and I realized, well, I can't do this on my own. And I started creating these leadership roles, right? So there was this leadership team, and part of that was in recruiting, right? And these people believed so deeply in the power of movement, of getting Black and brown people moving that that really was, I think, a transitional moment, right?

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That's when it went from being my little run club, something about me, to something much bigger than me. And all of that support and energy is what allowed us to get to, you know, 100 plus people showing up.

At the same time, I also pretty quickly realized that the New York City running community which was very male dominated, remains male dominated, did not love the idea of a Black woman having her own group and doing it her way, right?

There were people who made it clear that if I asked for permission, or if I did things their way they would support me. But that if I had my own ideas about how things should work, they wanted no part of it. And that was disappointing, but a realization that patriarchy and white supremacy are strong, right?

And while, of course, it's not true of all Black and brown male leaders, but many of them still have problems with Black women being in positions of power. I'm glad I learned that lesson then, because it's something that I keep in the back of my mind as I sort of move through the running industry and have a bigger platform and opportunities for conversation, recognizing that my intersectional identity plays a role in how people see me in this world.

Jill: Yeah. Oh, can you say more about that for folks who might not be familiar with the term intersectionality? Because I think what you said is really important.

Alison: Yeah, there's actually, in my book there's a great cartoon image that I, actually I have my book in front of me but I don't know if I'll be able to find it.

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Jill: That's such a good image, I loved that.

Alison: But yeah, it's a really powerful image, you'll see it. It is two people at a starting line. It's a white man in a business suit and a Black woman in a business suit, you know, they're both lined up starting this race. In front of the white man is a clear, beautiful path, it's unobstructed. And then the Black woman is standing there, she has an ankle weight, there is a hurdle she has to jump over, I think there's like a crocodile or an alligator.

Jill: Yes.

Alison: There's all of these obstacles in the way. And the white man turns to her and says, "What's the problem? It's the same distance." Right? So intersectionality looks at the ways in which our marginalized identities, whether it's our race, whether it's our gender, whether it's our size, whether it's our sexuality, impact our lived experiences.

So if you're a cisgender, heterosexual white man, you come into this world with a lot of privilege. That does not mean that you don't have struggles, because you very well may have struggles. You might be a cis heterosexual white man who grew up in poverty, but all of the privilege that you have is not part of your struggle. So that's what we're looking at with the white man.

Then this Black woman who has to face the forces of racism, of sexism, if she were a bigger bodied person she would face the struggles associated with fat phobia in this country, right? So recognizing that all of our identities play a role in how we see ourselves, how the world sees us, and what opportunities we have.

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So I very quickly realized that being a Black woman, people had ideas about, you know, whether I was seen as an angry Black woman if I shared how I really felt, whether I seemed like I was too subversive or disruptive for sharing my own opinion. I had to grapple with all of these ideas that society was placing on me in doing this work.

Jill: And so how does that affect how you show up, right? Because here you are, you're like, listen, I was born in this body, I did not choose, right? Like you get what you get when you're birthed into this world. But then it's like on you to figure out a way to make it work, rather than the rest of the world saying, "Oh, hey, let's help make it a little easier for you."

Alison: Yeah, it took me a while to actually have the language that I now have. I went to graduate school to get my second master's at this point in counseling psychology. And that journey really started from this running journey because, as I mentioned, I started to get curious about, wow, well, the more I run, the better I feel about myself. What are the connections between mind and body, right?

So being the nerd that I am, I wanted to go to school to explore that. And part of the work that we did in counseling psychology was to really hone our own self-awareness, right? In counseling and therapy, when you're the therapist, you are the tool. You are the instrument that is helping somebody move through their struggle.

So if you aren't comfortable with your instrument, that being yourself, then you can't be impactful for the person in the room. So through this program we had conversations about race and identity, conversations about our beliefs around class. Class meaning like classism.

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I remember having conversations around class and thinking about, wow, I think really terrible things about homeless people, right? Like when I see homeless people, what immediately comes up for me is they're lazy, they did something wrong, they're a burden, right? And these are all of the messages that we receive.

So part of this work is recognizing, you may never be able to get rid of the messages, right? But recognizing like, oh my God, there I go again, making assumptions about somebody. Making an assumption that somebody who's homeless, houseless is lazy, et cetera, et cetera. When in truth, that person could have been born into a situation without the resources, access, education that I had, therefore they find themselves in that position, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: More often than not there's nothing wrong with us, there's something wrong with society. And I know your audience and who you speak to and it's a lot of people in bigger bodies, a lot of fat people. And what fat people often hear and learn is that there's something wrong with you for occupying this body, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: I was on the plane, I'm on planes all the time, and there were larger bodied people taking seats on the plane. And I was like, "What a fucking disaster, I can barely fit in the seat." And it becomes the responsibility for bigger bodied people to buy two seats because the plane doesn't accommodate people's bodies, right? And all of a sudden it's a bigger bodied person's fault for daring to exist.

Jill: Yeah.

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Alison: I was really thankful for my education because we don't often, there are very few places where these conversations happen and where you're able to, with this understanding of how systems are impacting individuals, you recognize that you are perfectly fine who you are and there's nothing that you need to change. There's nothing wrong with you, we need to change the systems.

Jill: Yeah, so beautifully said. I do want to highlight this one quote that you included in the book that I think applies to literally anybody except, maybe except a cis white male, a wealthy cis white male. And that quote is, "I will inhabit my body. I will take up space in the world. And I will do it in a way that centers my own comfort and joy."

And I think that it's hard for people to do that. And I think, especially if you're somebody who has been oppressed by a system that you didn't create all your life, like that's a very powerful, brave and probably uncomfortable statement to make, but necessary for you to kind of move through the world the way that you do.

Can you say more about what that means to you? Because it really, like it related to me just because I exist in a fat body and so I'm definitely, and I'm female and I definitely experience that intersection. But I'm just going to stop talking and let you talk.

Alison: Yeah, you know, it's a decision that I made and it's a decision that I make daily, hourly sometimes, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: Because honestly, just, as I said, existing of my body and existing joyfully in spaces is, honestly a revolution, right? Because the messages,

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and this is what prompted my book really, the murder of Ahmaud Arbery and seeing the way that the world does not allow for Black people to move freely through space. It doesn't allow for Black people to experience joy, because that joy is often threatening to white people, right?

So I realized that just being who I am and inhabiting space and moving through space is revolutionary, and that I'm not going to spend my whole life being small just to satisfy other people, right? I hope that this book, Black people and other people with marginalized identities feeling that same way, taking control of the narrative and feeling powerful.

And I hope it alerts white people and people with privileged identities to see that we do occupy space differently and that they must be allies to help us ensure our safety. This book is not meant at all to be divisive, it's really about okay, now that you know better, now that you know our story, how can you get in there in the trenches with us and making sure that everybody has the ability to move through space freely and enjoy a long run?

Jill: Yeah, I just love that so much. Okay, so I want to bring it back to Harlem Run for a moment because one of the themes of your book is how a running program can be a social justice tool. And I thought that was just so cool. And I get it, right, because as far as my own community, like it is a similar thing, right? It is sort of like a social justice tool.

But I think like, you call yourself an activist and advocate, a disrupter, you say that your job is to push back against oppressive systems. And so I'd love to have you kind of speak a bit about how the running program does that, how running programs in general can do that. And yeah, what do you have to say about that?

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Alison: Yeah, so there's two big things. The first is what we were just talking about, that simply by virtue of Harlem Run or programs like yours existing, they are social justice, right? They are creating space for people who historically have not had access to movement, have not had access to that sort of freedom.

So Harlem Run being a running group movement, that it centers Black and brown people, welcomes people of all races, but centers Black and brown people, shifts the narrative about who is seen as a long distance running, and who gets access, right? So that's one piece of it.

But then the other piece is that I realized that with this community, we have an incredible power and voice, right? We can impact not just our local community, but we can have an impact nationally. And this really first came together when I led a run from Harlem to Washington DC, in 2017. Recognizing or feeling like, honestly, helpless after the election and feeling like I hadn't really done enough to influence the outcome of the election.

But I knew that with my community, if we had a shared vision and worked together, we could make a deep impact. And so I decided, okay, I want to be there for the Women's March. What if I organize a run from Harlem to Washington DC? I knew that the administration was going to be attacking Planned Parenthood. And here we are, like eight years later seeing just how much damage was done. But I wanted to put as much effort as I could into supporting Planned Parenthood and reproductive rights.

So very quickly, this small idea snowballed into this global event that raised over \$150,000 for Planned Parenthood and really ignited in people an understanding that running can be more than just about you, right? Running be something powerful that sends a message. We can use, the

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same body that the government wants to control and tell us what we can and can't do, we can use that body as a tool of resistance.

And that was one of the most powerful moments in my life. And there was also this recognition that what I was doing was also part of a long history of Black people moving their bodies in a form of resistance, right? Whether you think of Harriet Tubman, who was an ultra-marathoner if you want to put it that way, making several trips to bring people to freedom. You think about Martin Luther King Jr. and all of the marches and protests and movements that were thousands of bodies taking up space, right?

So I've had such an amazing opportunity to do this work. But it's beautiful to see the connection to history and my ancestors, right? Like this is the way that we have sent messages for hundreds of years.

Jill: Yeah. And it's powerful and it's effective.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: It's effective, right? Because when I think back to, you know, when I read about or see movies about all of the marches and the civil rights movement in the 60s, like change did happen. And I think, you know, not necessarily the level of change that we wanted, but significant changes happened. And it was peaceful and it was, you know, just that's what happens when people show up.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: And I love the concept of like moving your body as a way to effect social change.

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Alison: Exactly. Exactly. And, yeah, you know, I think that even in recent social movements, whether it's Black Lives Matter protests or protests around environmental justice, like that makes all of the difference, right? And if ever we lose or we forget the power of our bodies and the power of community like, you know, it's real. Policies change, people take heed to us when we show up in hundreds and demand change.

So I think for folks who are feeling helpless now, just remember just how powerful you are, right? Yeah, we can't control everything, but there's a lot that we can do.

Jill: Yeah. Yeah, you're right. You're so right. And I was just thinking about like why even people like going to races so much. Because I will never be competitive at a race. I will never win. I will never take a medal unless it's like a race of one person.

But there is something very powerful about running 13 miles with other people. And it is just like the energy of all those people moving their bodies together.

Alison: Exactly, that's to the point.

Jill: And that's just going out doing it for fun, you know? Yeah. So like, really that energy when you take it and you put it all into a specific point that you're trying to make or change that you're trying to create, it's powerful.

Alison: I had never actually considered that point. And as you were saying it, I was getting goosebumps, right? Because that is the thing, I also am not going to win a marathon, I'm not going to win a race. But there's something about everybody decided to show up for this thing today.

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Jill: Yeah.

Alison: And think about all the obstacles that were probably in their way in training or even the morning of, and yet and still we all showed up to do this thing together.

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: Like that is, I mean, that is so powerful. So never doubt what a dedicated group of people can accomplish.

Jill: The power of humans.

Alison: Yes.

Jill: Okay. Well, on the topic of races, and this is like kind of a slight detour, but you talk about the Boston Marathon in the book and your opinions about it. And so, I know we chatted a little bit before we started recording about the Boston Marathon. But can you share a little bit about your experience and your thoughts? And then I'll just be like, I'll be going, "Yes, yes. Say that again."

Alison: So I say a lot of things in this book that are controversial, but I think of them, my thoughts of the Boston Marathon are probably the ones that will get me hate mail. But I think it's great, because I think that means that people are engaging with the material.

So I say a lot about Boston, but the biggest thing for me is that for many runners, Boston Marathon is the pinnacle experience, right? Like if you qualify for Boston, that means that somehow you've made it. And for me, if you think about, you hold that idea on the one hand, then you juxtapose

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that with this idea that running is for everybody, that all you need is to show up, and running is a democratic sport.

Well, if the pinnacle experience of this sport is the Boston Marathon, which is exclusive, you can only get in if you can run certain times or if you can fund raise sometimes \$10,000. You know, that cognitive dissonance does not compute, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: So in the book I challenge the Boston Marathon to rethink what it stands for, right? I also look at the ways in which the actual race course of the Boston Marathon doesn't really cover Boston, but is centered in these small white areas that are often hostile to Black people, right? I've been cheering on the Boston marathon course and I've had the cops called on me and the cheer station for being too loud while cheering, right?

Many of the places that you go through, that sense of a lack of belonging is palpable. And again, you juxtapose that with the idea that running this for everybody and that it's something that you can just show up and participate in, right? So I do go in on the Boston Marathon because I'm hopeful that they can change that, right?

All of the other world majors allow for a lottery system, which means even though, you know, people are complaining about the lottery all the time and I get it. But that allows for regular people to participate in a marathon. The New York City Marathon also, and the New York City Marathon is imperfect, but also has this race free program that if you qualify, you get your race entry fee covered, right?

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There are intentional ways that we can make the Boston Marathon accessible without taking anything away, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: And I'm hopeful, I'm actually visiting Boston this weekend, but I'm hopeful that the BAA can take this feedback and sit with it and institute changes that honestly will make the sport better, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: Really be be more welcoming. And there's a lot of great people out there who, I know, would be interested in being part of that process.

Jill: Yeah. I hope it does make a difference because, I mean, the Boston Marathon is a special marathon. But like, in my mind I don't love how the specialness is associated with—

Alison: With the elitism.

Jill: With the elitism, right? I'm like, let's make it a special experience, because it's historic and because it's so inclusive, and because it encourages everybody to run, instead of making it special because it excludes 99.9% of the running community.

Alison: And I think a big moment, so when that really crystallized for me was during the pandemic when they offered, the BAA offered the virtual component of the Boston Marathon. And everybody who ran the virtual was allowed to purchase the Boston Marathon jackets.

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And people were up in arms. People were like, “Well, a virtual Boston Marathon is not a real Boston Marathon. And the fact that just anybody can get a finisher jacket takes away from my experience.”

So what came out of that was a recognition that people want to keep this Boston Marathon as something for only a select few. And they believe that if more people have access to it, it dilutes the experience. This is similar to when people without privilege are demanding access to what people with privilege have, it feels like something's being taken away.

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: But it's not, it's just that the circle is getting wider. You're not losing any rights, more people are getting access to rights. So in that way I see there's a real parallel between how the BAA and the Boston Marathon are structured and the inequities that exist in society.

And as we said, I'm hopeful that this is an opportunity for the Boston Marathon to recognize it does not ruin the experience for anybody if more people are allowed to participate. It just enhances the opportunity for people to participate.

Jill: Well, and if you feel like your experience was ruined because more people were allowed to participate, like it's time to take a moment and examine.

Alison: Exactly. What is this really about, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: Like it's about you and your ego.

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Jill: Yeah, exactly. It's like nobody's taking away your finish time and your finish line.

Alison: Right, you still did that. Nobody can deny it. The person who finishes in eight hours is not stealing any shine from you.

Jill: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, and as a very, very slow runner myself, I occasionally, I think I don't experience that kind of stuff too often because I'm so far at the back of the pack that I don't hear it. But I know that some of my clients have just heard comments of like, "Oh, I guess they're just letting anybody run this race," or whatever. I'm like, yeah, as a matter of fact, yes, that's exactly the point.

Alison: And that is a beautiful thing, right? And I mean we can go on and on on this, like I have a lot of friends who are in the back of the pack. And by the time you get there you have to go on the sidewalk and there's no resources for you.

And it's like, look, I understand that there are logistical challenges with keeping the road open for longer. Well tackle those challenges because you allow this person to purchase this space. That means that their experience should be equitable, as long as it takes them, right?

Jill: Agreed.

Alison: There's so much that the industry has to address, particularly if they want to welcome more people to this sport, right? Like all these people who started running during the pandemic, they all need to feel a sense of belonging in this sport. And part of that is rethinking tradition and the ways that we've always done things that no longer serve us.

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Jill: Yeah, I could not agree more. I mean, I'm to the point where I'm going to create a race just for my clients that has no finish time.

Alison: Yes.

Jill: Like you just get to finish when you finish because I'm tired of having folks say, "Well, I can't sign up for that race, because I have to finish in a certain amount of time and I don't think I can."

Alison: This is where at the end of my book, the epilogue, so a lot of the book is spent talking about how the running industry needs to make changes. But then the epilogue talks about, well, guess what? Whether the industry changes or not, we're doing it on our own.

And this is what I think is really exciting and disruptive, because exactly as you say, we can build our own races that allow people however long they need to finish. We can build running clubs and experiences and spaces that center us. And then guess what? The industry is going to come chasing after us to be part of that, right?

Jill: Exactly.

Alison: So it's not a threat, but it's a fact. We are going to build our own spaces and create our own inclusive economies, right?

Jill: That's it, yeah. It's like, if you don't want us, okay, fine. We will create our own space.

Alison: Exactly.

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Jill: So this kind of like segues into the concept that you talk about a lot in the book, is the whiteness of running. And I think you even say, the unbearable whiteness of running, which made me laugh really hard.

Alison: Yes.

Jill: And this is something that I myself, hadn't really considered until maybe, I think the previous presidential administration is where it like, for a lot of white folks, it became a lot more obvious. And we were just like, holy shit, we really have not been paying attention.

But it is something I think most white folks don't consider, is how white the sport of running really is. And in your book you talk a lot about all of the Black runners who actually shaped the running world and then literally just been written out of the history. So can you talk a little bit, I mean, Ted Corbitt was a name I'd never heard before I read your book.

Alison: Wow.

Jill: And the Pioneer Club, also had never heard of that. And, yeah, just I would love for you to sort of share some of this with our listeners, because there's going to be some minds blown.

Alison: Yeah, and this really, so history takes center stage in this book. In fact, the book opens with this timeline that's called freedom of movement, and it juxtaposes running history with Black people's reality. And I'm going to start in answering the question here and then I'll get to the actual question.

Jill: Okay, that's good. You just go, just go.

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Alison: Yeah. So I started compiling this timeline because I thought about 1963, which is the date that famed coach Bill Bowerman held his first run in Eugene, Oregon and welcomed “everybody” to show up and there were thousands of people. And I remember looking at the imagery of who showed up and it was mostly white people.

And so my mind started thinking, “Well, what was happening in 1963?” And then I remembered, of course, 1963 was when Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington.

It wasn't until later, 1968 that Black people gained the right to vote. We couldn't walk in the front doors, use the same water fountains, sit on the bus where we wanted to. All of that was going on during the time period when Bill Bowerman and others were saying, “Just show up, join us for a run.”

And as I dug in deeper I saw that in Eugene, Oregon it wasn't until 1957 that Black people were actually allowed to own property there, right? So he wasn't speaking to Black people when he was issuing this call.

Another date that stuck out to me because, I am a nerd, 1896 I know is the year of the modern Olympics and the first running of the marathon in the Olympics. That was also the year, 1896, that the Supreme Court issued Plessy vs Ferguson, which was what laid the foundation for Jim Crow segregation. It decreed that separate is equal.

So I started thinking about, wow, as white people were being called to the outdoors to do things, Black people were being more and more restricted about what we could do, where we could eat, who we could marry, where we could go to school. So the playing field was not even.

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But as I continued to dig, I realized that despite those facts, Black people like Ted Corbitt and the Pioneer Club actually were the architects of what we know as modern long distance running.

In 1936, New York Pioneer Club was founded in Harlem by three Black men. And they created this club because at the time clubs were not inclusive, were focused just on fast athletes, and they wanted a space where the everyday runner could join.

And in 1942, they were the first to open up their club, to integrate their club. This is before baseball was integrated. This was when clubs like the New York Athletic Club were preventing Blacks and Jews from being part of it. So this was this revolutionary club in the 1940s that was saying anyone, which is men at the time, anyone can show up.

And this club is what laid the foundation for New York Road Runners. Ted Corbitt was responsible for creating the idea around the New York City Marathon. Like all of this history, if I had known it when I started running, I would know that running was for me, right? I would know it because my people helped create it.

But the erasure of all of these names and events from our sport, has just done so much damage in terms of our understanding of who belongs and where our sport came from. And I hope my book accomplishes a lot but I hope this is one of the things, that people know these names, that people start to dig in and get curious about what are other things I may not know?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: What are other ways that history might have been erased? And start to dig deeper and what they think they know.

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Jill: Yeah, because it really, it totally opened my eyes to a lot. I was just embarrassed and like horrified, which I think is a common reaction. But also I was just like, “What the fuck?” We need to tell these stories.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: Like we need to give credit where credit is due. And I think that's like, in the running world and everywhere throughout history I think, you know, Black folks who have done amazing things have always been, either they've been whitewashed out of it or somebody else is taking credit for it or what have you.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: Like, everywhere you look, it is just example after example. But the timeline that you put in the beginning of the book was fascinating to me just to kind of see like, oh, on the one side here's running and all like the happy people doing all their running things. And then to have it like juxtaposed with like almost day by day, at the same time this is what Black folks were like literally fighting for their lives.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: Fighting for their rights, fighting for everything at the same time that we're like developing this, you know, fluffy, happy little running community.

Alison: On my tour I had an opportunity to speak with this woman, a white woman who was in her early 70s. And I was talking to her about how in her lifetime the national parks were segregated. In her lifetime Black people couldn't swim in public pools. There are instances where Black people

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would go to pools, get in the pool, and they would drain the entire pool rather than allow a Black person to swim in it.

And she knew nothing of this. I wasn't telling her history, I was actually giving context in the world that she grew up in. But it is an intentional practice of excluding these stories from people's consciousness, right? You see the way that the government right now has the stop woke act, all these laws to protect white people from feeling any sense of guilt or any sense of accountability.

Jill: Oh no.

Alison: So they're literally removing things that white people did and that the government has done in order to assuage people's guilt. And that's what we have to be mindful of, right? That this is not, you said that you were embarrassed, which I understand.

But also, it is not completely your fault. Like this is what's being taught so we must all be vigilant about what are the messages that we're receiving? And do we know them to be true? A decent amount of skepticism is important in this world in this day and age.

Jill: Yeah. Well, and one of the things I loved about your story is how when you talked about your father, and how you would be like, "Okay, Dad, this is what we're learning in school." And he's like, "All right, let me tell you the real history." And he'd give you the whole story. And I thought, wow, like, that's amazing, but also that must have been very frustrating for you to go back to school and be like, "Y'all are liars."

Alison: Yes.

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Jill: Right? Did you just want to scream?

Alison: Well, I wanted to scream for many reasons but on the one hand I'd be like, "Dad, this isn't on the tests, like please, just help me with what's on the test."

But then, yeah, going into school and knowing more than the history book, knowing than the teacher was so frustrating because you realize that you live in a different world, right? Like I was living in a world where I knew a complete story. And my classmates were living in a world where they just knew the sanitized, easy, digestible version.

And that's really, it's really frustrating and made me feel a lack of belonging and like I wasn't seen in many spaces.

Jill: Yeah. And you were in a predominantly white community as well.

Alison: Predominantly white school, super wealthy, so people with lots of privilege and access who really did not have a full understanding of history or the present.

Jill: Yeah, and were not motivated to change that.

Alison: No.

Jill: Of course, why would you be?

Alison: And that's the thing about whiteness, right? And when I say whiteness, I'm not talking about individual white people, I'm talking about a system that prioritizes white people. When white people are centered, seen as the default, why would you question that, right?

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Jill: Yeah.

Alison: So that is, when I talk about like white people live in one world and don't even know there isn't another world, meanwhile Black people live in our own world and have an understanding of the white world, right? So it will be uncomfortable for many white folks to read, but I hope that it is the first of a series of awakenings about this country, about the sport that we love, and what we can do about it.

Jill: Yeah. Well, and I think it's actually an easier entry into it. I mean, there's been other amazing books that I've read in the past few years. But I think with titles like *White Fragility* and so forth, like I think there's a lot of white folks that are just like, "Well, that's not for me because I'm not racist and I'm not fragile." And so it kind of like puts them off.

Whereas this is more, you know, if you're a runner, this is a book that you want to read because you want to understand other runners. And so I think that it's a great, I think it's a great entry point.

So, I mean, let's kind of talk about Ahmaud Arbery because that, I mean, that happened at sort of a pivotal point in your own life. And, I mean, I think it just, like when it happened as a runner I was horrified, as a human I was horrified. And it seemed like a pivotal moment because I think George Floyd was murdered just a short time after that. And it kind of seemed like, okay, like, now we're finally going to do something about it.

And then it doesn't seem like much has changed. So I'm curious, have you seen any improvements? I know you're on a lot of like leading some diversity committees and trying to affect change and lead change. But what are your thoughts about his murder and the reaction in the world? And then the fallout from that?

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Alison: Yeah, so the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, he was murdered in February, it took several weeks for people to even become aware of that. And part of that awareness was because I posted on social media. At least part of that awareness in the running industry and community was because I posted on social media and said, “Hey, aren't we concerned with runners safety? Why is Ahmaud not seen as within that context? Why are we not outraged that this is happening to Black people?”

My son at the time was nine or 10 months old, so there was also this very like visceral reaction to seeing that somebody like my son could be murdered for no reason at all and with no accountability or attention paid. So it was absolutely a turning point in my life.

And for the running industry it prompted, for the first time, this recognition that not everybody has the same access to running. That there are more obstacles than just running shoes needed to get out of the door, whether it's psychological safety, physical safety, an environment that is supportive to running, meaning decent air quality, sidewalks. Also a recognition that a black person moving through a “white” neighborhood of the suburbs could be at risk just by virtue of being in white spaces.

So there was finally this recognition of that. And many statements went out, many promises were made. And I think what I'm saying is, and what I talked about in the book is, it's a matter of whether the industry will have the endurance to keep with this, right? There will always be other things that get in the way, whether it's low profits, or whether it's other things that will seem to take priority in the industry.

So what I've, on committees and organizations that I'm focused on, it's really looking at how do we change the systems that are in place, therefore,

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when diversity is no longer sexy, or when John, who made this his passion project, leaves change continues, right?

Because what you often see is that there's one or two or several highly motivated people within an organization that are working on programming, but they're not actually addressing changing systems within the place. So those people leave, the programs fall apart.

I can give an example. At the running industry diversity Coalition we are undergoing a research project right now that is going to finally quantify racial diversity within the industry. So literally, how many Black people are working in these companies, in these brands, in these events, questions about their retention and their hiring. And that will be baseline data that years from now we can compare and see if things have gotten any better.

Are the trainings about hiring and retention leading to more racially diverse talent? If not, then we have to really think about what's going on here, right?

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: So I remain hopeful, but it's like if we're running a marathon, we're like at mile three. There's a long way to go to see if we're really going to make it.

Jill: Yeah.

Alison: And that being said, there really is no end point, right?

Jill: Right.

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Alison: This is dynamic and shifting, but it's something that you have to keep working on.

Jill: Yeah. And I think the thing that I find frustrating, you know, kind of like seeing how things are evolving is that the energy and the push to make change, it is seen as it has to come from the people that are going to benefit from the change versus everybody saying it.

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: But what I think is so interesting is that white folks benefit from dismantling white supremacy as well, right?

Alison: Exactly.

Jill: Like we all benefit from that.

Alison: I mean, yeah, I want to give a clear example because sometimes people don't understand that. So when you look at, I look at the election and all of these many conservative alt right folks are looking for opportunities to make it more difficult to vote in an attempt to suppress Black people's vote, right?

But that is so silly, because guess what? It makes it difficult for all of us to vote, right? But what often happens is when you're bought into racism or white supremacy, you go against your own best interest in order to maintain that hatred, right?

Jill: Yeah.

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Alison: Rather than recognizing, wow, if voting were easier it'd be easier for all of us. If there was greater opportunity for Black and brown folks to get access to education, everybody would have better access to education, right? But yet we're often so stuck because of racism and white supremacy that we just, we can't see beyond it.

Jill: Yeah. Yeah, agreed. I for one am super grateful that you wrote this book for the work that you're doing in the world. Especially in the running world, but in the world in general. And I think, you know, like what you're doing here, it like spreads out because when people run, people are happy.

What is that silly movie, Clueless? Where like she's a lawyer for a day or whatever and she realizes that the person she's defending couldn't have killed the dude.

Alison: You're talking about Legally Blonde.

Jill: Legally Blonde, not Clueless, yeah. Oh my God.

Alison: Yes.

Jill: Yes, but anyway, that was like the totally wrong movie.

Alison: I know exactly what you mean.

Jill: But she's like, "People who exercise have endorphins and endorphins make you happy and happy people don't kill people." Right?

Alison: Bottom line.

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Jill: Yeah, the bottom line is, I think the more runners we can get out there like feeling happy, I don't know. I know, that probably didn't apply at all.

Alison: You're exactly right. You know, I love the sport of running and I want more people to have access to it. And that's the thing you have to remember.

Jill: Yeah, exactly.

Alison: Running changes lives, it saves lives. Let's make it so that more people can have access to it.

Jill: Yeah, 100%.

Alison: That's what it's about. It's not about like calling anybody good or bad or making people feel guilt or shame. It's like, okay, now that you know this, let's continue to do this work so that we can all be happy.

Jill: Yes, exactly. Let's just do that because that seems like a lot more fun than what we're doing now, for sure.

Well, Alison, thank you so very much for joining me today. And I know I had like so many notes that I wanted to talk about, but we're totally out of time. But is there anything that we didn't say that you want to share with people? And then definitely where can people find you to follow you?

Alison: Well, I actually want to put this out into the atmosphere and we'll figure out how to make it work. But I would love for the two of us to, one, meet in person, but look for ways that we can work together in our communities.

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Jill: 100%.

Alison: Yeah, whether that's an event, a series of events, it would be so powerful to work with you. So it's in the universe, that means it's going to happen.

Jill: All right, let's do that. Let's do that. Everybody has heard it.

Alison: Yes.

Jill: It's happening. Yeah, I'm super excited about that.

Alison: Finding my book, you can find it any and everywhere. Search for Running While Black and my name. People have been really kind and asked me, is there a place to order that benefits you more? There is not, anywhere you order matters. And you can get the audio book, you can get the hard copy, you can get the eBook.

So please support because Black people, Black women do not have the opportunity to publish books often. And, unfortunately, my success or lack thereof has implications for future Black authors. So please support and leave a review if you love it.

Jill: Yes, I love that. And definitely check out Alison's book, and then what is your Instagram handle? Because you have a great Instagram account.

Alison: It's Allison, M as in Mary, Désir. So it's my name, Allison M. Désir.

Jill: Okay.

Alison: That's also my website, alisonmdesir.com.

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Jill: Awesome. All right, check out all things Alison M. Désir. And yeah, thanks again for joining me and I can't wait for us to create something amazing together.

Alison: Same here. Thank you, Jill.

Real quick before you go, if you enjoyed this episode you have to check out Run Your Best Life. It's my monthly coaching program where you will learn exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you have always wanted to be. Head on over to runyourbestlife.com to join. I would love to be a part of your journey.