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SPORTS

Athletes Are Conquering Distance. Sports Will Never Be the Same.

Basketball stars are shooting from deeper, golfers are driving farther and marathoners are running faster. Today's athletes are breaking their games.

By [Ben Cohen](#) and [Joshua Robinson](#)

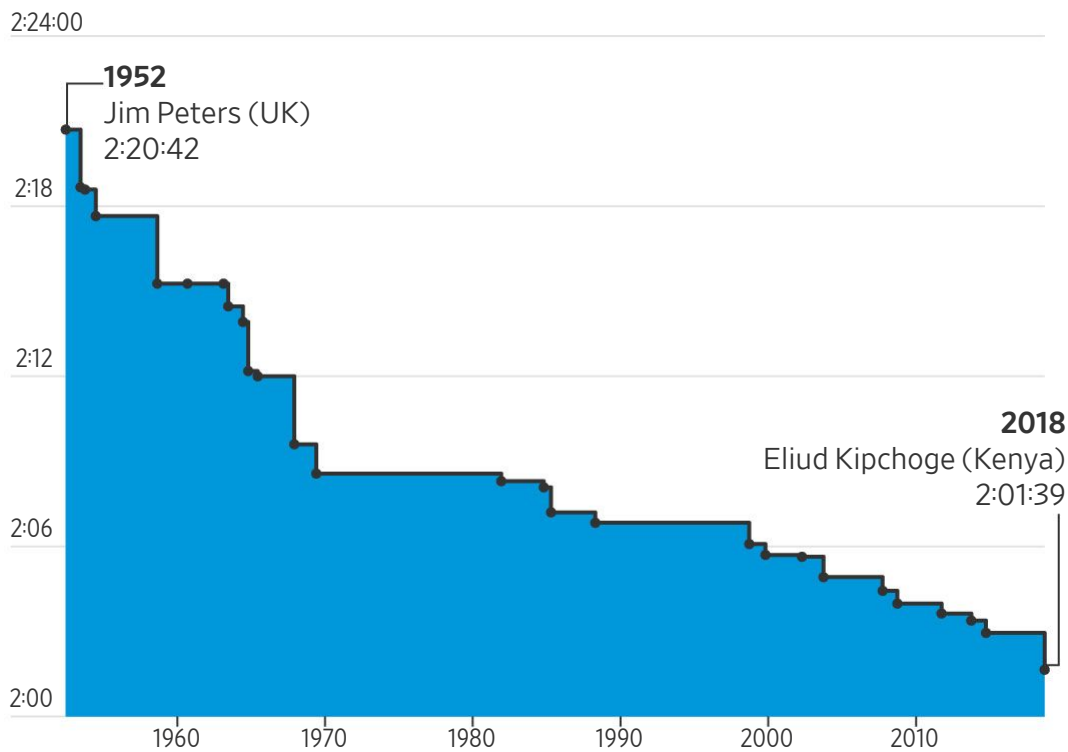
Oct. 2, 2020 6:00 am ET

For a couple of hours between the NBA and WNBA Finals, the Major League Baseball playoffs, French Open matches and NFL action this weekend, the fastest human in history will walk into a park and run circles for 26.2 miles.

Eliud Kipchoge is the Kenyan legend who set the world record with a 2:01:39 marathon in 2018—and then became the first man to break the 2-hour barrier by clocking an iconic 1:59:40 in specially tailored conditions last fall. The planet's best long-distance runner is the star of Sunday's London Marathon and was supposed to cover the sprawl of the British capital at hard-to-fathom speeds in front of thousands of spectators. He will tear around an empty St. James's Park instead.

But few people better personify this moment in sports. What he is doing is the clearest distillation yet of a phenomenon that is changing the way games are played. Distance has never been less daunting.

Fastest marathon times



Note:

Source: International Association of Athletics Federations

Kyle Kim/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pushed by technological innovations, smarter training methods and a reimagining of what's possible, humans are discovering new heights because they're capable of going longer. Basketball players are shooting from deeper. Baseball pitchers are throwing faster. Golfers are driving the ball farther.

The compression of the pandemic calendar accidentally made it easy to see that the same thing is now happening across sports: The games that are decades or centuries old are being reinvented.

The length of the 3-pointer in basketball used to be such an impediment that players chose to ignore the obvious incentive to try shots that were worth one more point. When the line was introduced to the NBA in 1979, 3-pointers accounted for 3% of the league's shots over the next five years. This year, 38% of shots were 3-pointers. The bigger the game, the more threes they shoot: 43% of field-goal attempts in the playoffs are coming from behind the arc.

It's the same story in the WNBA. After the 2012 season, when more than 25% of shots were 3-pointers, the league moved the 3-point line. That discouraged players at first—but not

for long. The next season, it was 21.6%. The 3-point rate was back above 25% by 2017, and this season it hit a record high of 31%.

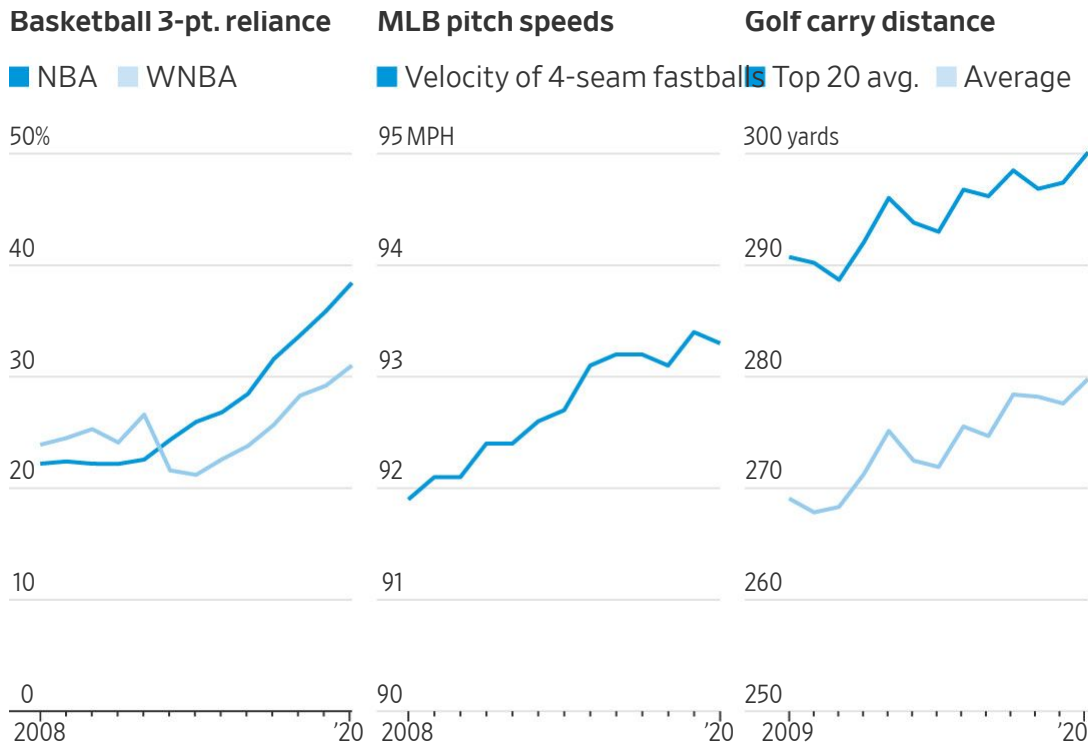
NBA players are also shooting deeper 3-pointers. The length of the shot no longer seems to matter. The percent of threes coming from above the break has nearly doubled in the last decade. The number of shots from 30 to 40 feet has tripled over the last five years. The average shot distance across the league was the longest in history.

It's so astonishing to Bob Cousy, the legendary Boston Celtics point guard from the 1950s, that he called NBA commissioner Adam Silver one day last year to marvel at what he was watching.

“What shouldn't be lost is something that I think nobody predicted 20 years ago: the incredible skill level of these players in terms of their ability to jack up these shots three, four, five feet behind the 3-point line,” Silver said.

The Distance Revolution

Sports are changing because athletes can shoot deeper, throw harder and hit the ball longer



Sources: NBA; WNBA; MLB; PGA Tour ShotLink
 Kyle Kim/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The statistical revolution in baseball has reduced the sport to a brutish simplicity: Pitchers want strikeouts, and batters want home runs. The result of their maniacal

pursuit of such extremes is plain to see. The ball is traveling from the mound to the plate faster than ever and carrying farther than ever once it makes contact with the bat. The average four-seam fastball accelerated by more than 1 mile per hour over the last decade, and hitters kept pace by remaking their swings to maximize dingers.

Like baseball diamonds and football fields, the dimensions of a tennis court haven't changed in 140 years. But within those confines, players are covering unprecedented distances—and so are their shots.

In the era of ludicrous topspin and 150 mile-per-hour serves, the top men's players have added nearly 25% to the length of their longest returns simply because of the positions they adopt to buy reaction time. Though the baseline is just 39 feet from the net, it isn't uncommon for players like Rafael Nadal or U.S. Open champion Dominic Thiem to stand another 20 feet back, practically against the wall. That means a return of service travels around 100 feet to hit their opponent's baseline at the end of a 78-foot court.

Chasing those shots also means that defending an area of just over 1,000 square feet requires players to run more than ever. During this year's five-set U.S. Open final, Thiem and Alexander Zverev each covered around 3.2 miles entirely in short sprints.

That might seem like nothing to the athletes who spend their lives eating up miles on bicycles. But even 2,100 miles at the Tour de France isn't the soul-crushing ordeal it used to be. Human performance in that race is so comprehensively understood that riders like the recent champion Tadej Pogacar can now plan their decisive attacks months ahead of time. Long before he landed in France, Pogacar and his team had identified a time trial more than 2,000 miles into the race, on Stage 20 out of 21, as his best chance to seize the leader's yellow jersey. It worked.

"We were dreaming that from the start," Pogacar said.



Eliud Kipchoge celebrates as he crosses the finish line at the end of his attempt to bust the mythical two-hour barrier for the marathon in Vienna.

PHOTO: ALEX HALADA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Perhaps no sport was more ripe for disruption than golf. Distance and technology have driven golfers mad for more than a century, but a series of events over the past two decades, and particularly the past year, have some playing an entirely different game.

The movement in golf really began when Tiger Woods won the 1997 Masters by a dozen shots and birthed a generation of players who believed that longer is better, said Andy Johnson, the founder of the golf site [The Fried Egg](#). But it was another major tournament, last year's PGA Championship, that convinced Bryson DeChambeau that even longer was even better. Brooks Koepka and Dustin Johnson had overpowered the field, and DeChambeau realized that the only way to compete was to play more like them.

This was the beginning of his quest to break the sport. A college physics major, DeChambeau used the pandemic to experiment with a diet of eating all the time, packing on 40 pounds. He won the U.S. Open last month in his first major triumph—and he plans to get bigger for The Masters next month. “Length is always going to be an advantage,” he said.

It's not just DeChambeau. The average carry distance for drives on the PGA Tour a decade ago was 268 yards. This year it was 280 yards. DeChambeau's was 314 yards.

The solution is not to make the courses longer, Johnson said, but to make them more varied. The golfers have too much sophisticated technology at their disposal for architects to play defense. Their drivers are larger and lighter. Their balls spin less and fly straighter.

They can drill their mechanics to the point of perfection. “It allows people to completely optimize their golf swing and their equipment,” Johnson said.

It’s not so different from the tools Kipchoge used to prepare for his sub-2-hour marathon last year. Not only had he refined his stride, fueling and envelope-pushing footwear, but he relied on a team of 41 elite pacemakers who had all done the same. They rotated in groups of seven to set the pace for five kilometers at a time. In total, the team ran somewhere north of 150 miles that morning, all so Kipchoge could cover 26.2 faster than anyone in history. The very next day, halfway around the world, Brigid Kosgei demolished the women’s marathon record.

Long distances had never been shorter.

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