



RUN FUN

Races Beckon Beginners

by Aimee Hughes

“I’ve run in cities, rural areas and suburbs. I’ve run while deployed to military bases in the Middle East, in cities on four continents, in blazing heat and winter snowstorms,” says Maria Cicio, a licensed professional counselor candidate and marathoner in Grove, Oklahoma. “I’ve been running regularly for 25 years, mostly injury-free, and have found what works best for me.”

For beginners, Cicio recommends starting with a 5K race. “There are a hundred reasons why a full marathon would not be fun for a beginner, but trail running, charity races and 5K road races are perfect,” she says.

Cicio attests the physical health benefits come from the training and preparation more than from the race itself. “You can run for many years before deciding to run an official race, in which case you’ll probably have already experienced increased cardiovascular health, improved muscle tone and strength.

“Running your first race can focus your running and turn it into training. You might increase your daily or weekly mileage, depending on the planned length of the race, or add some speed work to your regular running routine. When I’m training for a race, I’m more in tune with what my

body needs; I also sleep better,” she says.

The mental benefits are what keep many people running, even after the physical ones seem to plateau, advises Cicio. “Running means regular exercise, so it can improve our general mood. While numerous studies show this to be true, the best evidence comes from runners themselves.”

Almost everyone has heard of a runner’s high, even if we haven’t experienced it ourselves. It’s long been accepted that endorphins released during exercise create a feeling of euphoria after a satisfying workout. Recent research on mice by the Central



Institute of Mental Health at the University of Heidelberg Medical School, in Germany, suggests that it might be natural endocannabinoids that lighten our mood and contribute to the high.

Meditation master Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, in Halifax, Canada, teaches an online course, *The Art of Mindful Running*. He points out that running, or doing any physical activity, in a meditative state can deepen, train and enhance the mind. "Within 20 to 30 minutes, you have an opportunity to work with your mind. Instead of just spacing out or trying to get exercise, you can actually say, 'I

am going to be present, I am going to relate to my breathing and my movement a little bit,'" says Mipham. "This is healthy both for the mind and the body."

Those looking for an alternative to running on concrete and asphalt find that trail running ups the fun factor while nature nurtures us. "While I'd always loved running races, the roads rarely changed. Even the same trail tends to change daily, with a new puddle or a log to jump or crawl over, or a new offshoot. The natural running landscape is full of surprises," says Nikki Partridge, an avid trail runner,

American College of Sports Medicine-certified personal trainer and Stott Pilates instructor in Auburn, California.

"Trail running healed me," says Partridge. "I always had some injury from running: tendonitis, sprained ankles, runner's knee, pulled hamstrings, iliotibial band syndrome, shin splints or plantar fasciitis. I became a walking encyclopedia on injury and recovery. But the trails saved me. I no longer pronated when I ran, I had no more tendonitis from running on canting sidewalks—even my knee pain disappeared—my balance improved and my body was happy."

When winding down after a race, carve out ample time for recovery and reflection. "I always ask myself what I liked about how it was organized, course conditions, support staff and the after-party, and then look for another race that fits my preferences," says Cicio. "Consider taking a vacation around a particular race that interests you or find a local road race the next time you travel. For a modest fee, you get to run a race and typically luck into a T-shirt, food and party camaraderie."

The running world can open our eyes to new places, good people and greater self-awareness, along with physical fitness. Spring is a good time to lace up our shoes and begin the expansive journey.

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