

Local Runners of All Shapes, Sizes, Ages and Abilities Show That Anything is Possible

Posted on: Friday, 10 August 2007, 12:03 CDT

By Erin Ryan, The Idaho Statesman, Boise

Aug. 10--Last year, a nun named Sister Madonna Buder crossed the finish line of the Ford Ironman Triathlon World Championship at midnight -- 57 seconds before the 17-hour cut-off. She was 76.

I remember sitting there on my couch, stupefied. Here was a woman 50 years my senior swimming 2.4 miles of ocean, biking 112 miles of lava desert and running more than 26 miles of Hawaiian coastline, with enough left at the end to smile.

"I could never do that," I said.

This October, almost a year from that day, I will run my first marathon, mostly because others believed I could.

It started with a pair of running shoes. I needed new ones, and while browsing at Shu's Idaho Running Company, I bumped into owner Mike Shuman.

"Have you ever run a marathon?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I've done a half, and that's enough for me."

"I think you can do it," he said, "and I think you should."

I gave him all sorts of reasons why not -- I was out of shape; I didn't have the money or the time -- but Shu wasn't having any of it. He offered to sponsor my training, saying if I didn't like the program, I could walk away.

That was in March. Last Saturday, I ran 16 miles, and I plan to stick all the way to the Portland Marathon.

I owe Shu two things: an apology and a check.

The biggest hurdle

The hardest part of changing your life is realizing that you can. Organized running groups in the Treasure Valley are designed to help you recognize and unleash that potential, whether it means walking around the block or qualifying for the Boston Marathon.

The groups range in style from robust training programs to casual gatherings, and each has something valuable to offer.

You can run for free in certain groups, pay monthly or annual fees for membership in others or pay a lump sum for a full training schedule, gear, race registration and access to local therapists and nutritionists. You'll pay \$15 to \$35 a year on the lower end of the spectrum and up to \$295 on the high end. It just depends on your individual goals and needs.

We talked to coaches and members of three local programs, hoping to provide a slice of what's out there for experienced and first-time runners. They all have different methods and creeds, but the common message is this: "If we can do it, you can."

Boise RunWalk

In 4 years, Boise RunWalk has helped 1,500 people become runners. One of the first things the coaches teach is that being a runner doesn't mean you have to be an elite athlete. It means you are committed to putting one foot in front of the other.

The coaching staff demonstrates this diversity. Coach/owner Steve Blake ran his first marathon with Portland Fit in 2001 and was moved to create a similar program here two years later. Head coach Mike Carlson has 35 years of experience and titles at all competitive levels. Coach Anita-Nell Swanson went from weighing 527 pounds to 162 and running a dozen races last year, including a marathon. And Sparkle Paterson overcame addiction to become a leader and an inspiration.

Sparkle, by the way, is her real name. She was born on July 4, and her parents and nurses couldn't help but notice the uncanny brightness in her face.

It's still there, even when she talks about the personal battle that motivated her to run.

"A lot of people think, 'Oh, you're a coach. You must really know what you're doing,' but I didn't start running until I was 46," she said. "I suffered from alcoholism. It was a huge issue in my life."

Paterson was a dancer growing up and stayed active, but drinking had lasting effects on her health and happiness. In 1988, she got sober and stayed that way for 12 years, but she fell back into old habits around 2001 and struggled for four more years. Then she made a choice.

"I turned it over, from alcohol to running," she said.

At the time, she was 40 pounds overweight and could only manage a few minutes on the treadmill. Gradually, she increased the distance and the pace, and the satisfaction she felt kept her on track.

Her daughter encouraged her to join a running group, and Boise RunWalk was it.

"I remember showing up thinking, 'Look at these people; they're all runners and I'm not,'" she said. But as the weeks rolled by, she learned about nutrition, injury prevention, hydration and race management, all the while ramping up her speed and endurance.

She ran a half-marathon and a marathon that year and, at 47, continues to shave minutes off her pace and personal records.

"You can't eat an elephant in one big bite. With running, slowly but surely, you increase those miles," she said. "It really helps to have people running with you saying you can do it."

In addition to running with you, RunWalk coaches such as Paterson can help you take advantage of resources like consultations with sports massage therapists, physical therapists, chiropractic physicians and nutritionists. The expert advice is hugely beneficial, but it's balanced by collective life experience.

"It's the power of the group," Paterson said. "Some people like to run alone, and you can, but you still have that support system. There is no way I could have ever done this on my own. Believe me -- you run with a group, you'll become a runner."

Frank Stein agrees. He was a runner most of his life, but the "double-whammy" of starting a career and a family changed his priorities.

"I gained a lot of weight, 35 pounds over 7 years. I didn't have balance in my life," he said.

The real wake-up call came when Stein's doctor put him on blood pressure medication, so January 1, he made it his New Year's resolution to run Robie Creek. Soon after, he signed up for Boise RunWalk.

"Steve (Blake) and Mike (Carlson) were talking about the group, and they didn't talk about running. They talked about getting to the starting line," he said.

Through soreness and strain, Stein made it to the start and finish of Robie. He went on to run the Fit For Life Half Marathon and is working up to what will be his first full marathon in October.

Stein has lost 20 pounds. His quality of life is noticeably better, and he's become a role model for his children. His wife even took up running.

"One of the most important things is accountability, to others and yourself," Stein said. "The group has made me accountable, because you're running with who's in front of you, who's behind you and sometimes, who's beside you. What I really enjoy now is the community. Not just Boise RunWalk, but the greater running community."

See Jane Run

See Jane Run is the newest member of that community. It's an independent, woman-run, woman-operated fitness retailer designed to equip and support active women.

Founder/CEO Lori Shannon created the concept in San Francisco in 2000 because she had been burned by industry prejudice. Runners working in gear shops treated her like she didn't belong, but her less than "typical" body had seen her through seven marathons.

Shannon wanted regular women to have a place where they could explore fitness goals, and she designed a training program to facilitate that exploration.

Shannon's Boise store opened in April, and the still-developing program is free. She hired coaches that fit See Jane Run's "everywoman" model, women like Marilyn McAllister.

McAllister was an engineer for 20 years and woke up one day wanting to work with people. She got a masters degree in exercise and sports studies, went on to become a personal trainer and saw the opportunity to coach for See Jane Run as "serendipitous."

"It integrates so well with what I want to do in my own business, encouraging people who may not have ever thought of themselves as having an athletic grain in their body to try something," McAllister said. "There's always great support in groups. You see other people who look like you and think, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

Along with coach Lynn Barry, McAllister leads Saturday runs on the Greenbelt. They are both moms, avid runners and students of exercise science, and their meetings are an appropriate mix of chatting, stretching, Q&A and, of course, running.

"We go from the angle of creating a desire by talking about our own experiences, lighting a fire in someone else," McAllister said.

See Jane Run's current group includes a high school cross country runner, veteran marathoners and new moms trying to get back in shape.

"I think that's the real value of coming together on some of these things," McAllister said. "You can do it yourself, but you might miss that shared spark."

At 49, Pat Pyke is thriving on that spark. She's a mother, a cancer survivor and a mountain bike enthusiast who has always enjoyed running.

"I was attracted to See Jane Run because it's low pressure, run at your own pace. Marilyn and Lynn are so incredibly encouraging. They make it all about fitness and fun, whatever level you're at," Pyke said.

They also teach the science of the sport, offering strategies both physical and mental tailored to personal goals.

"It's a community, and it's really fun to be part of that energy," Pyke said, "of people deciding to change their lives."

Boise Y-Striders

People who have already changed their lives, who are fit enough to just go out and run, also have options for group support.

One is Boise Y-Striders, a 15-year-old outfit formed by Downtown Family YMCA director Jim Everett. It has about 100 members who run (ha) the gamut from slow and steady to fast and furious.

Current club president Diane McGarvey said that Y-Striders is essentially do-it-yourself, with some members running marathons under 3 hours and others stopping to smell the roses. They pride themselves on being spontaneous, but McGarvey said that even without the structure of a training program, the simple act of running with others helps people improve.

"It really does make you get faster, even if you don't realize it," she said.

Rich Marion calls himself "the caboose of the fasties" and credits his love of running to predatory elementary school girls with pointy cowboy boots.

In high school, Marion was introduced to cross-country. Then he spent a lot of time running in the Naval Academy, both around Annapolis, Md., and on an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Indian Ocean. He moved to Boise because of the Greenbelt and joined the Striders after trying to run the Idaho Great Potato Marathon cold.

"I made it to mile 18 before my legs forgot how to run ... Now I'm a 3:20 marathoner, and it's all because of the Striders," he said. "We don't even care if you're a member of the club or not. We're just all out having a good time running."

The Final Word

Any given Saturday, the Treasure Valley is full of people breathing with the rhythm of their feet. Some are alone, but the ones who are part of something bigger have a little more spring in their step.

"There are a lot of groups," Marilyn McAllister said, "and I think we all want the same thing for everyone."

Erin Ryan: 672-6732

To see more of the Idaho Statesman, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.idahostatesman.com>

Copyright (c) 2007, The Idaho Statesman, Boise

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.