



BRIAN TROPPIANO

# Fitness **FIRST**

Acclaimed program just one way Furman's HES department spreads its healthy message.

The idea was simple: Members of the health and exercise science faculty at Furman would help Greenville-area residents become better runners. The goal? To instill lifelong exercise habits and also conduct research to find out how a three-days-per-week running program could affect fitness levels and performance.

Then, almost without warning, the program took on a life of its own.

"We've been contacted by runners from every continent," says Bill Pierce, chair of the HES department and one of the founders of FIRST, the Furman Institute of Running and Scientific Training. The group has heard from runners in Korea, Hong Kong, South America, the United Kingdom and India, to name just a few ports of call. Runners from cities around the United States fly to Greenville, catch a cab to Furman, get tested, and then head straight back to the airport.

"Next week a guy from Panama is flying up," Pierce says, somewhat bewildered by the international acclaim for the program he helped hatch. "We wanted to help runners in the Greenville area. We had no idea we'd be helping runners in South Africa!"

**So how did Furman's running institute**, founded just three years ago, become the toast of the running community, with international media coverage, a lengthy waiting list and even a book in the works?

It grew largely out of the personal experience of avid runners Pierce and Scott Murr '84, an HES lecturer and director of the Furman Fitness Center. They would often discuss their running programs and how different training techniques affected their performance.



“We’ve got families, we’re getting older, we’ve been running for 20-odd years and we want to continue,” Murr says. “So we were lucky we had the opportunity to experiment and share and test ideas.”

Murr and Pierce had noticed that when they prepared for triathlons, the required swimming and biking work forced them to cut back on their usual running time. They feared that the change in their running regimen would adversely affect their times in local road races.

But they were surprised to find that despite running just three days per week — with some cross training on other days — their race times actually improved. In addition, they were healthier and suffering fewer nagging injuries. Best of all, says Pierce, “We were enjoying it more.”

He and Murr began to wonder if they could apply their new less-is-more philosophy to marathon training — and if it would work for a range of runners, from beginners to competitive athletes.

With the help of two colleagues, HES professor Ray Moss and Mickey McCauley ’79, a fitness specialist, they began testing their ideas, fine-tuning their running program and creating a battery of lab tests to assess such fitness measures as maximal oxygen consumption (VO<sub>2</sub> max), lactate threshold (the intensity a runner can maintain for extended periods of time), running economy and body composition.

In February 2003, the group kicked off the FIRST program with a series of free lectures on exercise-related topics. They also put out a call to local runners who wanted to pinpoint physical strengths and weaknesses through testing, and offered to use the results to create individualized training plans.

The lecture series was an immediate success, and soon area runners began to show interest in the lab tests as well. A small research study in 2003 led to a larger effort in 2004, when 25 people were selected from 50 applicants to undergo testing and follow a 16-week program featuring three running workouts a week (a speed workout, a mid-



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distance run and a long run), plus cross training work on two other days. Then they gauged the results of their efforts that December by participating in the 2004 Kiawah Island Marathon on the South Carolina coast.

And that’s when everything changed.

**Of the 21 FIRST runners who competed** at Kiawah, 15 set personal bests for the 26-mile, 385-yard distance. Thirteen improved on their best times by an unheard-of average of almost 20 minutes. Of the six that didn’t set personal records, four improved on their most recent times.

The results, backed by lab testing showing improved oxygen uptake and lactate threshold, sent shockwaves through the running community, which for decades had assumed that training for a marathon required logging mile after mile, at least five days per week.

Soon *Runner’s World*, the preeminent

running publication, called to do a feature story. Writer Amby Burfoot, who won the 1968 Boston Marathon, marveled at the groundbreaking success of what he described as the “Train Less, Run Faster” three-day-per-week training program. His lengthy article, complete with testimonials from satisfied customers, kicked off a steady stream of media coverage, ranging from international editions of *Runner’s World* to newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal*.

In 2005, another group of marathoners and half-marathoners showed similarly impressive results, and *Runner’s World* followed up with a second article in March of this year. The coverage has pushed Furman to the forefront of the international running community, with calls and e-mails pouring in faster than the four-person operation can take them.

“We get these applications from people who really look interesting, and



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#### TO LEARN MORE:

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we think we can help,” Murr says. “But we are all busy, and this is really something we do in addition to our jobs.”

The four founders of FIRST log many hours working with runners of all ages, sizes and abilities, and they say the fulfillment they receive from helping people reach their goals more than offsets the added workload. Moss, an exercise physiologist, says that FIRST is one of the most rewarding aspects of his career.

“We’ve had such a positive impact on people,” he says. “They are having success, they aren’t getting injured, and there is a good chance they can do this for the rest of their lives. And that’s really what our purpose is — to keep them going for the long duration. The winning is fine, and running marathons is fine, but it’s the health status that we want for these people.”

That philosophy is at the heart of the health and exercise science program at Furman, where part of the mission is community service. The staff consists of academic experts who are also avid athletes, and they feel compelled to spread

the joys and benefits of physical activity to their students, co-workers and the community at large — especially at a time when more than 65 percent of Americans are overweight.

And although FIRST has earned the most accolades, it’s just one way the HES department shares its message.

**Bill Pierce says that while it’s enjoyable to help good marathoners become great marathoners, it’s more important to influence sedentary people to become active.**

“That’s where the benefits are in terms of the health crisis we have going on,” he says. “In terms of public health, the greatest thing we can do is help the obese or overweight person get active.”

The department has worked to develop a host of popular on-campus wellness programs for faculty and staff, and it reaches out to the larger community through programs such as the Greater Greenville Shrinkdown and Greenville Walks.

The Shrinkdown and Greenville Walks are annual efforts in which Furman joins with the YMCA, Greenville Hospital System and Bon Secours St. Francis Health System to encourage healthy eating and exercise. This year, Furman hosted weigh-ins and led weekly discussions on fitness-related topics. The eight-week program was considered a resounding success county-wide, with 4,774 participants combining to lose almost 12,000 pounds.

Greenville Walks, the physical activity portion of Shrinkdown, attracts hundreds for weekly walks and encourages 30-minute sessions five times per week. Greenville Walks also strives to publicize public trails and walking areas in parks and other settings throughout the county.

Pierce says that although the results are gratifying, he and his colleagues are constantly looking for ways to take their healthy living message even further.

“Behavior modification is extremely difficult in this area,” he says, citing a culture and environment that reinforce a sedentary lifestyle. Obstacles to





Runners undergo a battery of tests as part of the FIRST program, among them blood lactate analysis (opposite top) and measurement of maximal oxygen consumption, which can be done with a portable system (opposite bottom) or in the lab.

**Members of the health and exercise science department** say their common interest is in fitness and in inspiring healthy habits in others, but their differing areas of expertise allow them to work even more effectively as a team.

For example, Moss, the lab expert, developed much of the testing done on runners, while McCauley, a personal trainer, is often called upon to advise runners on their form and technique. Pierce has completed more than 30 marathons, so distance running is his forte. Murr offers multisport expertise thanks to his experience in triathlons, including nine Ironman competitions.

As Murr says, “Our entire department is really committed to the concept of promoting physical activity. We’re all inputting different components, so it makes a pretty nice package.”

Top athletes as well as weekend warriors have taken them up on their pledge to help, calling or stopping by the offices to complain of a knee twinge, ask a nutrition question or fine-tune their training plan.

The FIRST team has found that people need encouragement, knowledge, structure and accountability — and that’s exactly what they will continue to provide for everyone they can reach, from avid marathoners to those just beginning a walking program. And when they hear feedback from those who benefit from their efforts, they know that they are achieving their own goals by helping other people’s dreams come true.

“If you read the statements, you’d almost be brought to tears, and sometimes I am,” Pierce says. “People have been able to accomplish things that have been lifelong goals, things they didn’t think they could accomplish. We get messages from people thanking us for developing this program, saying, ‘You don’t know what you have done for my life. This changed my life.’”

*The author, a 1994 Furman graduate, is a free-lance writer in Greenville.*

physical fitness include increased television viewing, Web surfing and computer games, along with residential areas designed for cars, not walkers or bikers.

“We have to find what will work and how to approach it,” Pierce says. “You can think of what we have in this country as an epidemic of obesity, or you can think of it as an epidemic of physical inactivity. And that’s something that can be addressed if we could just get people to do something.”

Another means of inspiring physical activity is the campus itself, where students and community members alike flock to run, walk, bike and roller-blade. IES professor Julian Reed is leading an effort to expand those opportunities by promoting the benefits of walking and developing maps that showcase the system of campus trails, ranging from

one to three miles in length. The maps are posted on campus and are available in handout form; they include routes around the lake as well as through the wooded areas on the perimeter of campus.

Furman is also reaching out to young people through a cross-country running camp. In conjunction with FIRST, a camp for high school students kicked off last year and will be offered again this summer. The weeklong session features expert speakers, flexibility training, fitness assessments, drills, demonstrations and more.

McCauley, a cross country runner during his Furman days, directs the camp. He says it’s just one more way to reach out to runners by offering inspiration as well as education. “We’re taking what we have enjoyed for years and spreading it to people out there,” McCauley says.