Basic Training

Modern Marathoners Have Fewer Miles on Them

By JOHN HANC

SO you want to run a marathon?

During the first running boom three decades ago, aspirants embarked upon a six-day regimen of arduous runs hellbent on crossing the finish line in the fastest time possible. Hollow cheeks, hobbled feet and an overuse injury or two were badges of honor for the mostly middle-class men who tackled the 26.2-mile challenge. Their icon was Frank Shorter, a Yale-educated lawyer whose victory in the 1972 Olympic marathon ignited the mass running movement.

Things have changed.

Today's marathoner is less likely to have been motivated by an Olympian than by Oprah. Her slow-but-steady completion of the 1994 Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., is considered the start of the second marathon boom, one that has dwarfed the first, and is far more democratic in nature. Ms. Winfrey was one of 277,000 marathon finishers nationwide in 1994; last year 410,000 runners crossed the line, according to Running USA, a nonprofit organization in Ventura, Calif., that keeps track of participatory running.

Associated Press /Stephen J. Carrera

EASY DOES IT Many marathoners run only three or four days a week.

The marathon has become an "everyman's Everest," said Amby Burfoot, the executive editor of Runner's World magazine.

Men, women, fledglings and fossils, of varying girth, are marathoners these days — in part because of the proliferation of training programs that make it, if not easier, at least less time-consuming to prepare.

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During his training for the Boston Marathon, which he won in 1968, Mr. Burfoot ran twice a day, seven days a week. Emil Zatopek, the great Czech runner who won the 1952 Olympic marathon (along with two other gold medals in the same Games), prepared by running mountain trails near his home in Moravia while carrying his wife, Dana, on his back.

Contemporary marathon programs require neither twice-a-day workouts nor spouse-hauling. Indeed, the new watchwords of marathon training are moderation and specificity. Gone — for beginners, at least — are the six days a week of running routinely recommended in the 1970s. Absent, in most programs, are even consecutive days of running.

Today, some popular schedules involve as little as three days a week of pounding the pavement. "It's gone from being excessive training for what many would consider to be an excessive event to a very trimmed-down, less-is-more approach," said Toby Tanser, a marathon coach in Manhattan and the author of "The Essential Guide to Running the New York City Marathon."

One of the leading less-is-more programs for running the marathon involves walking. It was developed by Jeff Galloway, a 1972 Olympian who believes that regularly timed walking intervals increase the likelihood of covering the 26.2 miles. In 2006, it worked for 18,000 Gallowalkers (as his followers are dismissively called by some old-school runners) who ran-walked their way to a marathon finish.

At least half of last year's marathoners used a minimal-mileage training plan, said Ryan Lamppa, a spokesman for Running USA.

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"The expectation has changed," said Bill Pierce, the chairman of the health and exercise science department at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., and the creator of a popular three-day-a-week program. "It's O.K. now to walk. It's O.K. to finish over five hours. People have a completely different approach to the marathon."

Those people do not include the Kenyans, Ethiopians and other elite athletes from around the world who will be running in and perhaps winning the ING New York City Marathon on Nov. 4. The best will not be fol-

Basic Training looks at the latest thinking about conditioning for recreational sports.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED Events like the LaSalle Bank Chicago Marathon have high finisher rates; some credit new training methods.

lowing a less-is-more approach.

"This type of program is designed to get you to complete, not compete in, the marathon," said Dr. William Roberts, the medical director of the Twin Cities Marathon in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Dr. Roberts endorses minimalist approaches. "They offer a lower risk for injury," he said.

Whether covering as little as 15 miles a week or as many as 100, the primary goal of all marathon programs is the same: to build your endurance to the point where you can cover 26.2 miles. Hence, the common denominator of every program is the weekly or every-other-week "long run" — a slow-paced run that starts at whatever distance you can now complete and, over months, grows longer.

"The long run teaches the body how to deliver and utilize oxygen more efficiently," said Carwyn Sharp, an exercise scientist with Wyle Laboratories, which conducts research on behalf of NASA.

As the runs lengthen, the body adapts by creating more blood vessels to transport oxygen-rich blood to working muscles; by manufacturing more energy-producing mitochondria; and by more efficiently repairing the microscopic tears to muscle fibers that result from the extended effort.

The long run is the one element, experts agree, that cannot be red-penciled out of a marathon program. But how long is long?

Here, experts disagree. Many say 20 miles is sufficient. Others, like Mr. Galloway, recommend conquering at least the full marathon distance in training. Still, whatever the distance of the longest long run, novices can't go from zero to 26 miles overnight, which is why most plans are at least 12 weeks long, and some last up to 30 weeks. What's more, most coaches and exercise physiologists recommend against even starting a marathon program until you have regularly run shorter distances for a couple of years.

Most programs also include at least one day of shorter but faster-paced running to improve efficiency; hill work not only to build leg strength, but also to prepare for steep elevation; and plenty of rest to allow the body to recover and rebuild.

For many people, finding the time to train may be harder than actually training. Gordon Bakoulis, who competed in the United States Olympic Trials marathon four times, and now works for the New York Road Runners, the New York marathon's organizers, says she has noticed a pattern among those who drop out before the race.

"It's not that they failed in the training," Ms. Bakoulis said. "It's just that they couldn't manage the logistics. There were too many early-morning meetings at work, too many Saturday-morning soccer games. You can't fake marathon training, especially the long runs."

But you can be reasonably certain that if you reach the starting line in one piece, you'll finish: In last year's New York City Marathon, 38,368 runners started and 37,869 finished — a 99 percent completion rate. Other major marathons, including the Marine Corps and Chicago's, have similarly high finisher percentages — and it's been that way for most of the last decade.

What does that say about the various marathon training programs?

"It says that they all work," Ms. Bakoulis said.