

RUN THIS WAY

Group runs are on track in downtown Greenville

By John Boyanoski
Staff Writer

No one walks down Greenville's Main Street at 6 a.m.

They run.

Hundreds of runners in small packs chugging up and down Main Street out to Augusta Road where the smell from restaurants starting their early breakfasts wafts through the morning air.

For a sport often seen as a solitary venture of hardcore athletes, group runs have reinvigorated the sport. Bill Pierce, the director of Furman's running institute, said the number of

are at all-time highs, and group running has been the fuel.

Jeff Milliman said he has counted 200 people cross in front of his Run In Store on Augusta Road - all before 7 a.m.

"It blew my mind," he said. "Fifteen years ago, that wasn't the case."

The group explosion started in the mid-1990s when people began training together for marathons supporting causes such as heart disease and leukemia, Pierce said. Those runners got hooked on the idea of training in



> "When people train with an exercise partner, they are more likely to adhere to the program," Pierce said.

Many runners say going in a group keeps them motivated. Sitting in the parking lot at the downtown Regions Bank (which has become a meeting place for about five groups) Brian Lazarus and Jon McClure almost shook their heads no in tandem when asked if they would be doing this without a group.

"I wouldn't get up without them," McClure said.

Lazarus said he ran off-and-on for years, but didn't get seriously motivated until he joined a group. He went from having never run a race three years ago to a several-times-a-year marathoner.

Safety is an issue as well. After a runner was attacked in the Del Norte area two years ago, e-mails spread among women runners telling them to not run alone. Many formed groups to stay safe.

The runners tend to recognize the other groups as they pass each other. Pleasantries range from a slight head nod and wave to a barely audible good morning to a flurry of rapid "excuse mes" if the two groups are on the same path.

While discussions of racing times and sneakers are expected, people also talk about mowing the lawn and their careers.

One group last week shared stories of seeing various U2 concerts over the years. They make plans to get coffee after the runs or go to restaurants as a group later that night.

Barbecues and trips together for races are common.

Routes get named after group members so when some says lets run the "Richie 5," they all know they are running a five-

es are a big part of group runs.

"It's clear that this is a big part of social lives," he said.

One group came back to their starting point to find a man smoking a cigarette in the front seat of one of their cars.

Another time, they found a couple passed out in a car off Faris Road with the engine running and the man's foot on the brake.

Sheila McCullough, the owner of Fleet Feet sports, which sees dozens of groups use it as a running base on nights and mornings, said health benefits and camaraderie draw people to groups.

She was once a member of a running group aimed at new moms. They ran together and added members based on the combined experience of running and motherhood.

"You gab. You motivate each other, and you learn about each other," McCullough said.

While running groups exist throughout the county -- the parking lot outside Furman's athletic building normally is packed on Saturday mornings -- downtown is the main gathering point.

All kinds of groups run downtown -- from beginners to marathoners.

One of the biggest is the iRun group that meets on Saturday morning in Cleveland Park. Originally started out of Run In , it grew to so many runners that it had to move for safety reasons, Milliman said.

The idea is to provide group runs for all kinds of athletes. As the runners get better, they form new, smaller groups.

"Many people will say, 'well, I want to get in shape before I join a group run,'" she said. "Well, the best way to get in shape is to join a group."