

A different perspective on marathon training

By Charles Clines



A few years ago I was training runners who had registered to run or walk a marathon for charities. I started with Joints In Motion, which benefited the Arthritis Foundation, and switched to Team 20/20, which benefited Prevent Blindness Texas. Both worthy causes, but after training participants for five years, I came away wishing there had been stricter requirements for the participants rather than just raising money.

These were six-month programs, which seems like a lot of time to train for a marathon...if you had been running before. However, many (almost all) of the participants had never run even a 5K, and here they were trying to train for an event that covered 26.2 miles. Some were walkers, and a few had run in high school. I even had one participant who had run marathons in the 2:20 range, but that had been some 20 years earlier, had quit running and had gained a middle-aged spread.

So, the training regimen for these participants was one to just finish the marathon without regard to time, except to beat the course-closing deadline. If I had to do it over, though, I would establish a requirement for these participants to have run at least a 10K.

Without a background of running, training for a marathon seemed a sure-fire way for many of these participants to come down with injuries. And several did. Also, a few dropped out when the mileage for the long run began hitting double digits and they began realizing just how far they had to run. I did like to brag that everyone who finished the program also finished the marathon. But only a few continued to run after that. Actually, the more I thought about it, the more I think I understood. Rather than run a couple of years while trying to build up to what many runners consider the ultimate accomplishment, these participants were starting out there. What goal could top that?

One of the more difficult things about training some of the runners was keeping them from trying to do too much, especially if they had run before. The man who had run fast marathons, for example, just couldn't hold himself back and tried doing too much before his body adapted to the training. His knees began aching so much that he had to drop out.

So, that's my only complaint about these programs. Running a marathon shouldn't be a starting point for runners. They should build up to one by building up to it so their ligaments, cartilage and muscles adapt to the sport. Preferably, participants should run at least two years before embarking on such an adventure.

The flip side of this, though, was watching and enjoying the thrill on everyone's faces when they did complete a marathon. It was a major achievement and they knew they had done something that only a small portion of people ever accomplish.

And it was even more gratifying that some of these participants continued to run or walk. By the way, I grew a new appreciation for walkers when I walked most of the way with a couple of my participants at the Honolulu Marathon. They might be walking, but it might have been a more grueling experience for them because they were out there seven hours. I ached all over after finishing.

Fortunately, many of these type of training programs are offering different distances, such as a half marathon. In fact, that distance would be a much more sensible goal for first-time runners. After doing a half, then these participants still have the ultimate goal to shoot for. That's the way it should be.