

Do You Want to Go Faster?

Since I joined MCRRC in 1998, I have raced Pike's Peek each year. Unfortunately, I seemed to get slower every time I ran it, though it's a fabulously net-downhill course. So discouraging! This year I decided to take matters into my own hands (or legs as it were) and actually TRAIN for the race, hoping to break the slow run cycle. I also decided it was time for some "professional help" so I signed up for the club's Speed Development Program (SDP) coordinated by RRCA-certified coach Tom Brennan.

The SDP began in 2002 with 65 runners, and now in its seventh year has quadrupled, with 275 speed-craving hopefuls signed up for 2008. The program is designed for all runners who want to improve their running time for a 10K, but the increase in speed, skills, techniques, and overall fitness garnered from the program could translate into improved racing at any distance.



The group meets twice weekly, on Tuesday evenings at a local track and Saturday mornings at various locations (for coached sessions), and joining a club run during the week is encouraged. You must be a member of MCRRC, able to run four miles, and have completed at least one road race. The program has a small fee associated with it, but this includes the entry fee for Pike's Peek 10K, the goal race of the training. For those who can't run four miles, Tom offers a set of pre-program build-up schedules to help runners prepare.

After I checked out the SDP Webpage (mcrcc.org/programs/speed_development/), the program structure seemed simple enough to me. We provide Tom with feedback on a questionnaire. Using race data and other factors, he places us into program groups based on a mix of the length of our current long run and/or weekly mileage, i.e., either Red (10 - 15 miles), White (15 - 25 miles), or Blue, the highest mileage group (with over 25 miles logged each week).

At the orientation meeting (see photo on left) Tom explained that the workout intensities are based on your own level of fitness developed from your recent race times and training level. He said all runners will be taken through the phases of training to allow them to "peak" for Pike's Peek, but to do this the groups are further divided into pace groups ranging from 5:45 minutes per mile to over 12 minutes per mile, based on our estimated 10K times. Tom provided all groups with workout schedules and instructions on required paces. My current running and race times placed me in the Red 11 group, which was at first a bit disheartening, but I knew I had to start somewhere!

As I listened to Tom, my mind wandered ...probably thinking about my future 10K PR. Gazing around the room at the wide mix of runners present, I wondered what motivates all these people to join the SDP, what are their goals and influencing factors, and most importantly, how successful will they be in achieving them with the SDP?

As a scientist, curious runner, and an editor in need of a good story, I decided to examine these issues more closely in a two-part series.

I recruited a total of 20 male and female volunteers of varied ages and paces (including myself) from the 2008 SDP groups, with no more than 7 per program group. They were asked to complete a brief questionnaire so I can get insight into their association with MCRRC, running and racing experience, and document their reasons for running and their distance preference. Participants were also asked to define three goals for the program, and specify their primary one. To understand prior training experiences within MCRRC, they were asked if they had completed any other programs such as the Beginning Women's Running Program (BWRP) or were repeat attendees at SDP.

Why They Run

Reasons for starting to run included wanting to achieve weight control or lose extra poundage, improve health and overall fitness levels, feeling bored with current workouts, wanting to try a new sport or to improve performance in a current one, set a personal racing goal or rise to a challenge from a friend, deal with a mid-life crisis, try to quit smoking, or just to exercise outside and enjoy the social aspects of running. Several mentioned that running is a cost-effective sport and required minimal equipment (i.e. shoes).

Once they got started, many of these pragmatic physical reasons gave way to more qualitative emotional ones. The primary focus became how they felt about running, how it was addictive, allowed them to find solitude and joy, and

develop deep pride in their accomplishments as they both lost weight and progressed as runners. Running provided a way of maintaining fitness while setting new and more challenging goals for themselves, and several commented that it helped them with other sports by increasing leg strength and building mental toughness and character. Others liked the social aspect and the friendships made through group training or racing. The majority said that running is now a treasure and a way of life for them.

Running Experience and Distance Preferences

Baseline data for the surveyed group showed that the clear majority (of both men and women) have been running for 3 years or less; one quarter have run for 7-12 years; and one woman had run 19 years!

Although the SDP is listed as a training group with a faster 10K as the proposed goal, half of the SDP volunteers said they had run at least one marathon, several had run three, and two had run eight or more 26.2-milers. Only one respondent has run less than a 10K distance to date. The majority also replied that they favored long runs over 6 miles versus shorter ones, though some said they preferred both for different reasons. It was clear that the shorter runs or speedwork are tougher, more challenging and, as expected, push them to their limits more than the longer runs that are easy, relaxed, conversational, and FUN!

Primary Goals

*“Reach high, for stars lie hidden in your soul.
Dream deep, for every dream precedes the goal.”*
— Pamela Vaull Starr

Goals are an important part of any training plan, for otherwise you are just out there having fun—which often works for me! Within this group, regardless of their assigned training group, the majority have firmly decided on a precise time or pace goal to achieve in an upcoming race, myself included.

Many said they also wanted to learn the correct techniques and core principles of speed training, and to remain uninjured so they can keep running, continue losing weight, and maintain/improve their conditioning. One person wanted to feel less intimidated by faster runners and another has set sights on qualifying for the 2008 Most Improved Runner Award. Everyone wants to improve his or her overall speed. Naturally, it’s the SDP!

Comfort Level

Although we all like to see ourselves as “fast,” all but two reported they felt they were placed into the correct pace groups by Tom. Although several expressed disappointment initially, they have learned that the group they are in is appropriate for them either because it challenges them or because it is helping to teach them how to pace better and forces them not to go too hard in every workout. Two said they have “unofficially” moved up slightly in pace, and feel this is working better for them.

History with MCRRC Programs

Over 75 percent said they are newcomers to the SDP Program but one individual was a five-time repeater. One-third of the group had no involvement in other MCRRC training programs; 50 percent had done either the Smarter Running, Co-ed, or BWR Programs (or several); and six or so said they completed either the Half Marathon, First Time, or Experienced Marathon Program (some several times).

Epilogue

With about eight weeks to go in the SDP, we are all getting comfortable with our training groups and required workouts, and working with Tom and the other volunteer coaches toward our goals. I will continue to monitor the group’s progress and will report in more detail on the personal stories, triumphs, and successes of the participants in the *May Rundown*. Stay tuned, the best is yet to come.



All of the 2008 SDP coaches (front) and the group are still smiling before our first track workout.

Photos courtesy of Tom Brennen