

Dreams of Speed

In Part 1 of this series on the MCRRC Speed Development Program (SDP) (published in the March *Rundown*), there were 8 weeks remaining before participants ran the Pike's Peek 10K. I continued to track the activities and monitor the progress of 20 volunteers of varied ages and paces out of the total 275 club members who signed up for this program in 2008.

The runners who volunteered to be tracked from the Blue Group were Emma Barrios, Jenny Boyd, Rod Brana, Lee Firestone, Sean Rinn, and Clabe Wright. Runners from the White Group were Sacha Dodson, Patrick Lopez, Lauren Minch, Glen Mossy, Gabby Uza, Wanda Walters, Nick Woolheater. Red Group members included Elisa Berkowitz, me (Christina Caravoulis), Karla Gutierrez, Eric Ovedovitz, Stacey Pushnik-Doherty, Maggie Toscano, and Muriel Walker. As we trained under the watchful eye of Program Coordinator and Head Coach Tom Brennan and his team of pace group coaches, my stated mission was to collect the data to assess how successful members of this tracked group would be in achieving the goal of speed and learning about pacing at the same time.



Head Coach Tom Brennan and his coaching team provided valuable advice and encouragement to the SDP runners.

Go Long... Go Fast

Weeks passed, and running weather was often cold, rainy, and unpredictable. Venues for our long runs varied from the Capital Crescent to the muddy flooded Rock Creek Park trail. Tom encouraged us to participate in club or other races during this program and so he could gauge our progress and make adjustments to pacing groups, if needed. Most members of the tracked group took advantage of these chances to test our abilities and many met with success. For example, Stacey Doherty kept expanding her distance as she ran the Run Aware

5K, her first 5-miler at the Country Road Run, the Piece of Cake 10K, and then completed 10 miles at Cherry Blossom, each with good times. Sean Rinn reached one of his goals, running the Greenway 50K. Sean finished third in his age group and with a new PR. Muriel Walker ran her first 10-mile race at the RRCA Club Challenge in February and proved she now had the stamina to go the distance! My own time at the Piece of Cake 10K was not what I had hoped, but I definitely redeemed myself by running the rainy Cherry Blossom 10-miler about 11 minutes faster than I had in 2007. Better still, when Jenny Boyd ran the Shamrock Half Marathon in March, she finished the race with something more wonderful and longer lasting than a PR—a marriage proposal from her boyfriend Ken (who she connected with during SDP a few years before). Clearly things were starting to fall into place, as participants of all skill levels were gaining speed and also confidence that surely helped them improve at these varied distances.

Weekly Challenges

Even though the training (especially the speed workouts) became more challenging as the SDP program continued, the tracked group members got stronger and saw they could take it. This still did not preclude some participants (including myself) from “commenting” to the assistant coaches and Tom about how these workouts really tested us, both mentally and physically. At this point, the overwhelming majority of those being tracked felt their current pace group was still the correct one for their level, and the other SDP runners were very supportive. Many also reported they were appreciative of how Tom and the other coaches were there to encourage everyone and help them focus when it got tough. Although everyone agreed they were tired (read: exhausted) after these track workouts, there was no doubt that pacing these dreaded circles on the track helped us get faster. Some noted that these workouts had positively affected how they felt on their tempo or long slow distance runs as well. Although the majority (90 percent) of the 20 tracked SDP participants remained injury-free, along the way, a few stated they had pre-existing conditions that forced them to take a few weeks off and miss some training.

Any Last Words?

The last weekend before the 10K goal race, the SDP group met extra early and did a “pilot” run down Rockville Pike to get familiar with the course. Stopping along the way, Coach Tom provided valuable advice and suggestions to help participants understand how they should be feeling at each mile and when to press harder to maintain or pick up the pace. Our final SDP workout was held at Bohrer Park (see photo left) where we ran a scenic loop with our groups under sunny skies.



Stay in line... no pushing or shoving, please!

It's Race Day!

After months of training, it was finally race day. The entire group gathered pre-race for a brief warm-up with our pace groups, and the customary group photos (see below) were taken. We tied on our chips, lined up for the wave starts, then in turn, with each bellow of “the G-word”, our individual yet united journey down the Pike began. Enjoying the final downhill, racers crossed the finish mats then enjoyed our reward, a great post-race festival with good food and random prizes.

May I Have the Results Please...?

With the race run and the results in, the bottom line is that everyone in the tracked group from SDP who started at Shady Grove, did finish the 10K. Most importantly, 90 percent of these 20 participants improved from their assigned pace at this distance. In the Blue Group these pace/mile improvements ranged from 5 seconds to 45 seconds per mile faster. Lee Firestone's pre-race goal was to run sub-40 for the 10K and he achieved it by running 39:51, a 6:25 pace.

Emma Barrios trimmed 9 minutes from her 2007 Pike's Peek by running a 56:10 this year, however, her real goal was met later at the Frederick Marathon where she posted 4:26:12. At Pike's Peek Jenny Boyd and Patrick Lopez each ran about 7:25 pace and Gabby Uza delivered a very respectable 47:26 finish

In the White Group, the improvements in pace/mile ranged from 17 seconds to almost a minute and a half. Specifically, Nick Woolheater reached his goal of running this race in 41 minutes, for a 6:38 pace. By crossing the line in just over 58 minutes, Lauren Minch was two minutes faster than her desired time of one hour. Sacha Dodson and Wanda Walters both had great races, finishing in 47:03 and 62:32, respectively. Wanda ran a 10:04 pace, and was over 2 minutes faster than her time in the 2007 race, which she later credited to “actually following the SDP program”. Despite a hip injury, Glen Mossy also ran 17 seconds faster/mile at Pike's Peek than his training group pace, and later ran both the Fredrick and Parks Half Marathons.

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The soon-to-be graduates of SDP pose for a customary group pre-race photo.

Photos courtesy of Tom Brennen

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In the Red Group the pace/mile improvement ranged from 13 seconds to 1:17. Karla Gutierrez's time of 65:57 was well within her stated goal range. Red 11 Group member Stacey Doherty crushed her Piece of Cake time and ran a blazing 9:43 pace at Pike's Peek. Finishing in 53:29, Eric Ovedovitz ran 8:37 pace and far surpassed his sub-9 minute/mile goal. Despite missing several training runs Maggie Toscano showed her perseverance and finished the 10K in a solid 11:17 pace. Muriel Walker ran this 10K in just over 60 minutes, and as for myself, I finished the race in 66:12, a solid improvement from my 2007 time at this event. Elisa Berkowitz did not run Pike's Peek, but she had already met her stated goal, finishing the Cherry Blossom 10-miler in 1:54:39.

Celebrate Good Times

With the race now history, the next week, a celebration pizza party capped off the end of the training session. Tom presented certificates to the most improved program participants and shared personal stories from participants. The SDP group honored Tom and all the assistant coaches with small tokens of appreciation for their stellar efforts and key roles in making this program successful. It's important to mention that many of the participants had not only reached or surpassed their goals, but as a secondary benefit, had also developed deep friendships and found new running partners along the way. A large number of SDP graduates also signed up for the Half Marathon or Marathon Training Programs, wanting to keep that forward momentum going by setting new distance goals.

We'll Be Back!

The 2009 program will begin in January, and from what I've heard, most of us will be signing up again. Yes Tom, despite our grumbling, we know a great thing when we experience it! For the few folks moving on to other MCRRC Programs, they take with them an understanding about the best way to train, avoid injury, and run faster.

To sum it up, my observations show that the SDP is right for both the beginner and the experienced runner. The multi-level training approach and successfully structured pace groups does allow the majority to improve from wherever they begin. Granted, it is hard work and requires commitment (especially on those cold winter nights at the track) but I know firsthand that if you do the planned workouts and are patient, the speed will come.

Do you have dreams of speed? Don't miss the next opportunity to live your dream. Check out the SDP Web page for sign up information, and join us on this running journey to Pike's Peek in 2009.

Note: Special thanks to the 20 participants who graciously agreed to be monitored for this article; your candid input was extremely valuable and appreciated. It was my pleasure to share this training experience with each of you in 2008.

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