
Women on the run

Running 101 shows women how to channel their running instincts into a positive physical experience - just for them

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Bring up the subject of running to the average multi-tasking, spreading-herself-too-thin woman and she will likely reply with a knowing smile.

Her life is all about running: running after the kids; running out the door to work; running to the curb with the newspapers because she forgot it's recycling day; running to answer the phone she left upstairs when she went downstairs to do the laundry.

Now, talk about running for fitness, or perhaps enjoyment, and this same woman may heave a wistful sigh. Yes, it's something she's considered, maybe even something she's been invited to do with friends. But those friends are real runners. They're working on stretching their daily workout to three miles. They run in 5Ks. They actually have running shoes.

Which is why novice runners like Katie Abel, 31, of Sea Girt often have no choice but to run solo ... only to find it too challenging.

"I tried it on my own last April and it didn't work," she says. "I would go out one day and then two weeks would lapse."

Runners agree that running in company is easier than going it alone, but with the legions of experienced runners streaming down the boardwalks and over park trails, where does a woman run when there's nowhere to hide her lack of running skills?

The perfect place might be within the ranks of the 80 or so women currently setting their own pace in a class aptly named Running 101.

The 12-week series of running 'classes' was begun by John MacGillivray, a lifelong athlete, experienced runner and active member of the Jersey Shore Running Club, of which Running 101 is an offshoot. It occurred to him that novice runners, particularly women, needed a place to start.

"I realized that there's beginner classes in other other sports," MacGillivray says. "They have them for golfers and I thought, 'Why not for runners?',"

MacGillivray researched other running programs around the country for beginners. He shared his findings with friend and fellow runner Elaine Hartung of Hillsborough.

"John was the originator of Running 101," says Hartung, current vice president of the running club. "He's our resident running expert and he coached running for several years. We knew the idea of a beginner running program had been successful in other areas. We decided limiting it to women only would make it more special."

Hartung says she and John put a brochure together and put the word out. The first class drew about 20 women. By the second year, she says, the class had swelled to almost 80.

Clearly, Running 101 was a hit. But just how does one take that first step to a running future?

"As soon as someone signs up, we start e-mailing them," explains Hartung, a certified running coach who assists MacGillivray, also a certified coach, in conducting the classes. "We write to them and ask them to start walking, to try and just stay on their feet for 30 minutes.

"We also tell them not to buy anything until after the first class. Then we'll have a guest speaker talk about what to look for in running shoes. Shoes are an important purchase and we don't want them to invest unwisely."

Running 101's students meet once a week at Holmdel Park, where the group follows a course around the lake.

"We start with a 30-minute exercise warmup. Then we begin the running portion, walking four minutes, running one minute," Hartung says. "We repeat that, going in a circle so we keep in contact."

The classes, Hartung says, focus on endurance rather than pace.

"We mix walking and running and gradually increase the running until we're running for 30 minutes straight," she says.

Running 101 doesn't offer any secret formula or magic method to turn nonrunners into runners. But Abel says running with any kind of consistency is not something she was able to accomplish before joining Running 101.

"With this, it's different," she says. "You know you're going to a class. People are expecting you there. It's more structured. My sister and I joined together, and it's one of the best things I ever did. I'm running two or three times a week, for 40 minutes. Before, I could barely run two minutes."

Abel feels her success can be partly attributed to the lack of pressure in Running 101.

"I don't feel like I'm upset because I'm slow and not at the front of the pack. There (are) all different levels in the class, so that's nice," she says.

There are varying experience levels within Running 101 because veteran runners from the first year have stayed with the program.

"Some women who were with us at year 1 are still with us," Hartung says. "Since we have different levels, we do speed work and track workouts. Women stay with our classes because there's safety in numbers and there's camaraderie."

Karen Connors, 52, of Holmdel is one of Running 101's original members and continues to be a regular.

"My girlfriend was joining, but I balked at the idea because I never ran," Connors admits. "I finally went along with the idea that I could always quit. We ran a little, we walked a little and gradually we were running more, to the point where I said to myself, 'Oh, I don't want to quit now!'"

Connors was surprised to find that at the end of the 12-week course she was running 30 minutes without stopping. Even more surprising, she found herself entered in the running event that has become the end-goal of the summer class: the annual all-female Saturday in the Park 5K race on Labor Day weekend.

The motivation to begin a running regime can come from a variety of sources.

"Many of these women didn't have the opportunities in high school (that) girls have today to learn sports. Many of them have spent their lives as mothers, wives, doing things for others," Hartung says. "Now they feel it's time to do something for themselves. It's not just the physical benefits that running offers. There's a mental uplifting that goes along with it."

Hartung has her own personal motivation for seeing these women succeed at a physical challenge: Her aunt was a victim of domestic violence, and so, Hartung says, "Anything I can do to make women stronger, I do."

As for MacGillivray, his support of women's fitness has not gone unnoticed. In 2004, he was honored with the 2004 Fred LeBow Award for Promoting Women's Developmental Running. The award, presented by the New York Road Runners Club and the Road Runners Club of America, is not often given to men, Hartung says.

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