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Running: Physical And Mental Healthfulness Of Such Devotion Debated

By Sam McManis

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Hard-core runners, the kind you will see lined up near the front of the starting area at this morning's Cowtown Marathon in Land Park, tend to lean toward the obsessive side of the personality continuum.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

How could these hearty souls not obsess a little, given the physical rigors and mentally taxing repetition of putting one foot in front of the other in rapid succession on roads and trails over many long, lonely hours?

But there is a fringe of this hard-core fringe lurking out there on the streets, women and men who take this healthy pursuit to extremes - not necessarily in distance or duration, but rather in frequency.

They are the people who run every day - day in, day out, year in, year out, decade in, decade out - no matter the conditions or their condition.

Some might call them crazy, totally off the rationality charts. But they have a less-judgmental name for themselves: "Streak runners," for whom the idea of a "rest day" is unthinkable, who chafe and fret when life's complications threaten their runs, and who consider the daily ritual as normal and necessary as brushing their teeth.

Northern California, perhaps not surprisingly given the high concentration of ultra-distance runners, is home to a few decades-long streakers.

There's Bill Finkbeiner, 53-year-old ultramarathoner and Auburn landscaper, who hasn't let hernia surgery or shin splints keep him from his appointed round on the road since Jan. 1, 1980. There's 62-year-old Granite Bay businessman Len Bruckman, who's kept his sciatica at bay and schedule free for that early-evening run starting on Feb. 10, 1985. And there's the relative newbie, 58-year-10/9/09 3:51 PM free for that early-evening run starting on Feb. 10, 1985. And there's the relative newbie,

58-year-old Andy Swan, a circus owner and performer who ignores his plantar fasciitis and gets in at least a token run every day while - get this - juggling. He started March 10, 2008, and hasn't dropped the ball since.

All are immortalized in the loosely organized United States Streak Running Association, which mostly exists on the Web (runeveryday.com). The rules are simple: Runners sign up - they are on the honor system to tell the truth - and note that they have run at least a mile in each 24-hour period.

Though, truth be told, many streakers scoff at the bare minimum and make it a point of pride to log "real runs" (say, at least four miles) daily.

Even among this rarified group of 221 people, gradations of commitment exist. And nobody is at a higher plane than Mark Covert, 58, cross country coach at Antelope Valley College in Southern California.

Starting as a 17-year-old in 1968, Covert has averaged about nine miles a day, every day, for more than 15,000 days. This despite some daunting challenges.

He ran hours after hemorrhoid surgery. He ran with flu symptoms that put him in the hospital. He ran daily for weeks on a broken left foot, first using construction boots but then opting to cut the upper material out of his running shoes. He ran after arthroscopic knee surgery. He ran on the days his parents died and ran when his four children were born.

"I probably haven't had more than 25 days (of the 15,000) when I've just done the minimum (one mile)," he says.

And, unlike most others on the list, Covert is a former nationally ranked distance runner. He won a national cross-country championship at California State University, Fullerton, in the early 1970s and finished seventh at 2 hours, 23 minutes, 35 seconds in the 1972 Olympic Marathon Trials. Those speed-demon days are gone, but Covert still goes at a decent clip on his hourlong morning jaunt from his Lancaster home. That's how he views the streak - as a part of life.

"I get up, I work out in the morning, it's done," Covert says. "It's more of a challenge when you're injured or sick, but almost always I can say that after I get my hour run in I feel almost always better."

So, is it good for you?

But is it healthy? Physically, of course, whether they can withstand the pounding depends on genetics, musculoskeletal makeup and running mechanics.

Mentally? Well, that's where it gets tricky. Some psychologists believe such extreme running borders on an unhealthy addiction.

A study published last month in the medical journal *Behavioral Neuroscience* reported a "direct relationship between the intensity of running and the severity of withdrawal symptoms" and concluded that "excessive running shares similarities with drug-taking behavior."

The Tufts University researchers tested rats on running wheels. Those that performed significant revolutions were compared against "inactive" rats. They concluded that withdrawal symptoms from

excessive running was similar to that of a morphine addict.

Another recent study from Oregon Health & Science University showed that extreme exercise increases a chemical in the brain's hippocampus, which dictates learning and memory. Exercise, researcher Justin Rhodes reported in the journal *Neuroscience*, strengthens brain synapses. But he also found that too much of this chemical impairs cognitive function. His research with mice found that the "exercise addicts" performed significantly worse at navigating a maze than the control group of mice.

Passion - or an addiction?

So, can running to excess be labeled an addiction?

Dr. Jim Taylor, a San Francisco performance psychologist who also happens to be an under-three-hour marathoner, believes it could be.

"I don't really believe in a positive addiction," Taylor says. "Addictions are, by definition, unhealthy. Running can be an addiction in several ways. I've met many people who get injured and can't stop running. Invariably, they stay injured.

"Emotionally, overzealous running is only unhealthy if it interferes with their lives. Does it hurt your relationships? Your work? Does it hurt your general sense of well being?

"The problem is, for many people quote-unquote addicted to running, it's become part of their self-esteem."

Granite Bay's Bruckman, however, scoffs at the thought that he might be "addicted" to the pursuit.

"Give me a break," Bruckman says. "A half an hour out of your day every day is not 'taking over your life.' Now, if I were an ultramarathoner doing four-hour runs a day, OK, maybe. You'll find that most people who do this are disciplined and know how to allocate time."

Yet, Bruckman does admit that such a streak "begins to define you" and that he has experienced a "runner's high." But he sees it as mentally refreshing, not detrimental.

"For me, it's 45 minutes to an hour every day that I can think of anything," Bruckman says. "Most people don't have that time. It's a way of being yourself and letting your mind do what it will. It's important to the creative process."

Others, such as circus owner Swan, embrace the obsessiveness.

"When I was younger and preparing for marathons, I was so compulsive I'd go out at night with a headlight and my glow balls to juggle and run, what I call 'joggling,'" he says. "Imagine the remarks I got."

Better than other habits

Still others have traded one set of addictions for others. Take Andy Kotulski, a 69-year-old Montclair, N.J., runner who has completed 615 marathons and has run a minimum of four miles a day for 20 years.

Kotulski was once a two-pack-a-day smoker who admits having an addictive personality.

“I used to have the habit of having a couple of beers every night,” he says. “Man, if I couldn’t have it, it was like my day wasn’t complete. I didn’t like feeling that way, so I quit drinking.

“Running is habit-forming and if you don’t do it, you feel something’s missing. Maybe there are short-term downsides, but there are long-term benefits. It’s great for your health.”

But would an exercise physiologist agree?

Bruce A. Sherman does. The 54-year-old exercise physiologist from Shaker Heights, Ohio, has run every day since May 16, 1978. He says he advises runners to take a rest day or do cross training instead, rather than run every day.

He doesn’t take his own advice, though.

“How I accomplish that is that I run at many different paces,” Sherman says. “

I run hard on Sundays and if you see me on Monday, you’d say, ‘Somebody should give that poor grandmother a ride; she’s going so slowly.’ Mondays are always slow recovery for me. “

Sherman has run on the day he had a colonoscopy, on days when the suburban Cleveland temperature (counting wind chill) reached 70 below zero, when it’s been 125 degrees in Death Valley.

Has he ever thought of taking a day off?

“I had that feeling on my 1,000th day (running in a row),” he says. “I thought, ‘This was a nice place to end it.’ But at 9:30 that night, I said, ‘Screw it. I can’t stop. I’m running.’ “

And he’s run every day since.