

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

Fitness Trends

If you read the sports news or some fitness magazines, or talk to fitness fanatics, you would have noticed that there are plenty of public races one can participate in these days. On SGRunners.com, a Singaporean runners' portal, the 2008 race calendar lists 46 events. For the highly motivated athlete, she can race virtually every weekend if she so chooses.

For those who are only familiar with the classic runs like the SAFRA Sheares Bridge Run, Army Half Marathon (it has since been re-branded Singapore Bay Run & Army Half Marathon) and the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon (SCSM), there are now niche runs that cater specifically to women (SHAPE run and Great Eastern Women 10K – both started in 2006) and kids (Cold Storage Kids Run – started in 2008). Last year also saw the inaugural Aviva Ironman 70.3 (Ironman 70.3 races consist of a 1.9 km/ 1.2 mile swim, a 90km/ 56-mile bike and a 21.1 km / 13.1 mile run, which adds up to 70.3 miles of total racing, hence the name.) where 800 triathletes took part in the race that granted 75 qualifying slots for the Ford Ironman World Championships 70.3 in Clearwater, Florida, USA. On 31 May this year, another novel event – the Adidas Sundown Marathon – introduced the idea of an ultra marathon (84 km) to Singaporeans. It was also the first time a public race was flagged off at 8.30 pm (for 84 km) and 11.59 pm (for 42 km) respectively. Many of these diehards had completed the night race with hardly any rest before they rushed to the Padang to see their children participate in the Cold Storage Kids Run on 1 June! As if that was not enough excitement, on 18 Oct this year, we will witness the world's first nighttime Olympic distance triathlon – 11Global Singapore 2008!

That mass of Singaporeans who have taken to running is also evident from the rising numbers in some well known races. The table below indicates the numerical pattern.

RACES	2005	2006	2007	2008
SCSM	21,000	30,000	40,000	
SHAPE RUN	-	2,500	6,000	8,000
GE Women 10K	-	3,200	8,211	



The enthusiasm towards racing is also telling from how soon registration closes after the launch date. According to the Shape Run organisers, the 6000 places in 2007 were snapped up in 12 days and the 8000 places in 2008 were taken up in 9 days!

Another recent phenomenon is the increasing involvement of older people in distance running and the slower paces seen among these runners. This appears to be a global trend as Hal Higdon (Runner's World magazine columnist) noted the declining male runners' median time in the New York City Marathon:

1983 – 3:41:49

1993 – 4:14:27

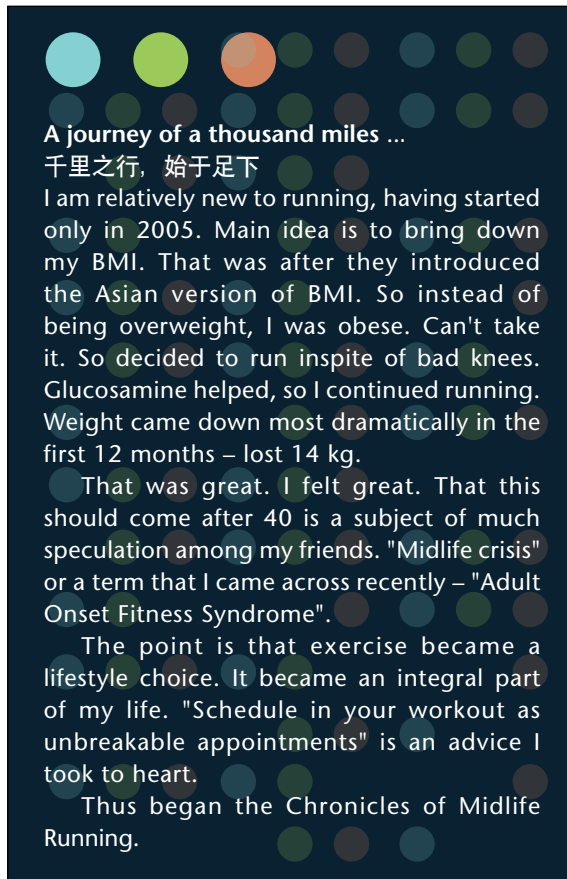
2003 – 4:28:41

My sister quipped recently that she could tell a man who has entered midlife by a triad of pathognomonic signs, for example, quits his job to start a business, buys a flashy sports car and signs up for a marathon or triathlon! I have personally witnessed many friends who were not athletic in their school days become serious runners when they are in their late 30s and 40s. Having entered the midlife stage, I am beginning to understand the motivations underpinning the engagement in endurance sports in the second half of one's life journey. Marc Bloom (former editor of Runner's Magazine) once commented on the New York Times that runners over 40, average joggers and top-notch competitors are discovering new opportunities in the masters age group, and learning that as midlife athletes they are able to repel the limitations associated with growing older. Bloom noted that people in their 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond find they can enjoy running and, more significantly, continue to meet the rigorous demands of training and competition. By their numerous examples – and through research results that are starting to materialise – those in the vanguard of the "gray striders" phenomenon are dispelling long-held notions of aging.

Closer to home, a good friend of mine, known as BFG on his blog, commenced his new running lifestyle in 2005 when he was in his mid-40s. Within a short span of time, he completed three

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half-marathons and three full marathons while inspiring a small band of friends within our church group to adopt running as part of our lifestyle as well. Why does a person in midlife run? BFG's first entry on his blog site grants useful insights:



A corollary to more older people getting involved in distance running is the philosophy of "slow is good". This concept is new to me as one who prides himself in running fast and beating fellow runners. Jeff Galloway, the world renowned "less is more and slower is better" guru writes that one ought to slow down the pace by 2 to 3 minutes per mile and take a walk break for every mile if one wants to run long distance in general or complete the marathon specifically. Thousands of runners, including my friend BFG, have been helped by this "run-walk-run" approach that makes it possible for mere mortals to cover insane distances like 26 miles 385 yards or 42.195 km (the precise measurement of the modern marathon).

Finally, I turn my attention to the younger generation of Singaporeans who have recently been labeled as "more fit but less tough". This was a remark made by the Minister of Defence, Mr Teo Chee Hean in response to the sudden deaths of two 19-year-old national servicemen

(Second Lieutenant Clifton Lam Jia Hao died during jungle training in Brunei, while recruit Andrew Cheah Wei Siong died after fainting during a two-kilometre walk at Pulau Tekong). *Straits Times* reporter, Judith Tan found out that it is almost a universal view of educators, parents, doctors and fitness experts that our young people are not as robust as their parents. She commented that today's youth are soft, given that most are mollycoddled in air-conditioned homes, with maids tending to their every need. Even the Defence Minister had to concede with this assessment: "I think they are less able to take knocks. They are more fragile."

The choices of leisure and entertainment options that keep our young indoors and sedentary are mind-boggling. Gaming has become so sophisticated and realistic that once a young person lays his hands on one device or software, chances are he will be stuck on it for hours. Subtract the other hours needed for school, homework, tuition, co-curricular activities and sleep, it is not difficult to fathom why few kids are spending their time outdoors toughening up their bodies. Two recent incidents brought serious concern to me regarding the modern lifestyles of the young.

We had a group of friends and their children spend a weekend afternoon on Pulau Ubin cycling. As most of our friends had not visited the island, we decided on an easy route that would take merely two hours from start to end. Notwithstanding that the island tracks went over undulating terrain, I was flabbergasted when two of our kids gave up easily and absolutely refused to continue. They were flushed and sweating copiously, and demanded to go back to an air-conditioned place for iced soda water immediately. At the end of that outing, quite a few of the children commented that even though they had enjoyed the day on the island, it was the most physically demanding day they could recall!

On another occasion at a social gathering, we were entranced by the family's Wii (for the gaming illiterates like myself, I was taught that this is the fifth video game console released by Nintendo whose direct competitors are Microsoft's XBOX and Sony's PlayStation 3). With its Wii Remote, it allows users to play tennis, golf and bowling very realistically because of the in-built accelerometers and infrared detection to sense its position in 3D space when pointed at the LEDs within the Sensor Bar. While the kids and adults were screaming in delight at the game of tennis, I could not help but think: Would it not be better if we all got out there in the sun and played real tennis?

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We have now an odd situation in Singapore where the older citizens are enthusiastically getting fitter while the younger ones are becoming less tough. Reading MM Lee's optimistic remarks given at the Economic Society's Annual Dinner (*The Straits Times*, 12 July 2008) that the next five to ten years will be the most promising in the country's history, I feel less hopeful unless we can nurture a nation of people who are both mentally and physically fit to take us to the next height. Recalling the electrifying atmosphere of the inaugural Cold Storage Kids Run (CSKR) on 1 June 2008 brings that precise hope which is needed. Organised by Enterprise Sports Group (the same one which organises the Great Eastern Women 10K), they wanted to attract 3,000 children for the seven race categories. In the end, the turn out was so good that for just the youngest category – the Sunshine Orange Chase for kids 3 to 6 years old – there were more than 3000 children running around the Padang accompanied by another 3000 adults (this category required parental escort)!

My hope is that there will be more public



Dr Tan Poh Kiang with his wife before her 15km race at the New Balance Real Run 2007.

events like CSKR to trigger a movement steering our children away from the Wiis, XBOXes and PS3s. It is imperative for parents to make every effort to encourage the young to engage in all sorts of outdoor sports to develop their bodies and their mental strength. The success, it seems, depends a whole lot on parents leading by example. It is as simple as this – parents who adopt a lifestyle of fitness will have a better chance of bringing up children who will be fit and tough. ■