

20 Reasons to Start Running at Any Age

- *By Skip Cleaver | For Active.com*

In many ways running is the most democratic of sports. Anyone can participate anywhere she or he chooses. It matters not if running athletes are rich or poor, female or male, old or young. Ethnicity, race, religious persuasion, and orientation are irrelevant. Size and age have no bearing. Location-location-location becomes anywhere-anytime-any distance in the runners' world.

There are no rich franchise owners—anyone can be a race director. Running clubs and national organizations are staunchly democratic, with no aristocratic elite; they are open to all, and at every level.

Running can be done alone, or with small groups, or with thousands. You cannot suit up for the NFL, WNBA, or have a set with the Williams sisters or Federer. You cannot play in major league ball park. You cannot go out and compete in a round of golf with LPGA or PGA folks. But you can run a 5K, 10K, half marathon or marathon on the same course, at the same time as the world's elite runners. Running is one of the oldest of athletic activities, and the most utilitarian in origin. Nobody asks a runner about occupation, but may inquire as to pace, base and next race. No one tells a runner she is not welcome. It is wide open, and for all.

Running is also the most portable of sports. It depends only on attitude, not on latitude or geographic location. Except for busy highways or other dangers (never run on Interstates, for example), there are few roads, streets, neighborhoods, parks, paths and trails where runners are not seen. This portability means that traveling is no obstacle. And running is running whether residing in or traveling to Florida, Minnesota, Flanders or Manitoba.

Great runners come from all corners of the globe, and so do average and slow runners. And they come from all walks of life. Athletes stride through deserts, forest, and fields; runners enjoy riverside or oceanside jaunts. Runners run up and down mountains. They run pretty much where and when they choose.

Technology plays a very small role in running. Shoes are the only real investment required (although some would argue now that even shoes are not needed), and the technology for building running shoes and for developing shoe materials has advanced tremendously. Complex watches that are mini computers, heart rate and other monitors, and GPS devices are now part of running for many, but they certainly are not necessary.

There is still relatively little expense. Some seem genuinely determined to spend a lot of money on clothing and watches, shoes and monitors. You can, if you like. But really there are few things necessary to spend money on, except for comfortable clothing, travel and race fees.

Race timing, of course, has gotten much more complex and sophisticated. But the impact of materials and the digital age is still relatively small, and when it comes down to it, simpler is usually better unless it's the Olympics or a major marathon.

At the scholastic and collegiate level, racing is one of the healthiest of competitions, and the one with the least cost, especially cross country. It's also the only sport that one can compete in at school, and continue to participate in decades later into one's senior years.

Whether traveling for business or pleasure, running shoes and duds can go along easily. The sport and the benefits are always readily available.

Some sports require expensive and complex equipment, along with fields, courts, arenas or stadiums. Sometimes these are unavailable, especially to the ordinary citizen. They are also always expensive. But growing up poor does not prohibit a child from growing up to be fast. Nutrition does play a role, as does health care availability in general, but usually it is available to all—and more so now with the Affordable Care Act in the U.S.

On average, the sport of running costs much less than other organized sports, yet it provides so much enjoyment and benefit. And it provides this benefit to participants for many decades.

Schools require less extensive and expensive fields or facilities for running programs. African runners, for example, compete on the world's roads and tracks. And they dominate with few, if any, sporting facilities at home in comparison to European countries. Technology and economic power aside, advanced countries can be beaten, and beaten badly, by teams from third-world countries. Running is open to all.

Age is a factor in every other sport. There are few age-group competitions, for example, outside of running. In running and racing, people sometimes begin after retirement, or certainly later in life. Some run in their youth and put it away for a while, then revisit after their kids are grown. Often older women had no chance before Title IX at participating in other athletic activities, but find success in running and racing.

Running is a natural and instinctive activity that can be performed at any age. Exercise, health benefits and enjoyment are common to most sports, but few other competitive activities are readily available to those who wish to participate. The 87-pound sophomore boy is not likely to find success in football. A 150-pound, six-foot girl is unlikely to win in gymnastics. But they can both be successful athletes as runners. Ten-year-old girls can compete in the same race with 80-year-old women, and both can win their divisions.

Few sports give back a feeling of elation and exaltation, and few give participants such boundless energy, power, health and quality of life. Few other sports provide such a sense of mission and accomplishment, and few are as specifically measurable in terms of progress and benefits. Whether you are preparing for middle school or mid-life, high school, college, work, travel or retirement, a running program can be tremendously valuable. And it is available.

There is nothing like it. Running is open to all-comers. Running is the most democratic of sports.